Holy Diver

Summary

Fifteen students. Trapped in a school where they are forced to kill one another by a demonic avatar claiming to serve a Mastermind. The walls are closing in as some begin to fall to temptation and try to 'ascend' from their hell. If things go on like this, the imprisoned students will lose all hope and kneel before the Mastermind in submission.

But there are still those willing to fight! Refusing to let themselves be blackened by the torment and pain! With hope in their hearts, they search for the truth that will surely lead to their liberation! Makoto Naegi may be your average student with peculiar luck, but he knows that he simply has to have faith in his classmates.

With the Ultimate Detective, Kirigiri Kyouko, and the Ultimate Male Model, Dio Brando, surely they cannot fail. Can they?
Makoto Naegi stood outside the door and wondered when he was going to summon the courage to actually knock on it.

It wasn't as if the conversation was going to be worse than what had already happened today. Hope's Peak was meant to be the start of something new. A chance for Naegi to be more than just your average kid with luck that could go from terrible to amazing—where the worst day ever could become the best because of one simple ticket—and be a proud student of the best school in the world.

Instead, he and fourteen others were trapped in the school-building and forced to participate in the sick game of whoever was behind all of this. A Mutual Killing Game that had already led to the deaths of four of Naegi's classmates, hell his friends, at least in his mind, and there was the fear in the back of his mind that it wasn't nearly close to over. A tiny part of him that wondered if it'd only end with one student left standing.

No. You can't think like that. We're not going to fall into that kind of despair. Naegi told himself. Maybe he was being naive; telling himself comforting lies to avoid facing the dark truth ahead. Or maybe he was on to something.

Kuwata was acting in self-defence. Fujisaki and Maizono were—Victims. Not directly of the Mastermind, although Naegi could never absolve that monster of true responsibility, but victims of their own classmates. Sayaka Maizono, who had been driven by fear of what would happen to her and her bandmates if she remained trapped in the school, had been the first to try and attempt a murder. Kuwata had only killed her to protect himself from a crime she planned on framing Naegi himself for, although Naegi could never have held that against her.

It was same with Oowada. They had been victims of the Mastermind just as the rest of them were. It was the Mastermind who had been the one to torment the group with threats towards loved ones and the revelation of their darkest secrets. It was designed to toy with their minds and torment them enough that at least one of them would lose all hope and try to 'Ascend' from the Killing Game.

Murralsee was what their 'servant' called itself. It had first appeared when Naegi and the others had been called into the school gym, all of them curious about why the exits were blocked by massive iron-gates. The mere sight of it had almost given him a heart attack when it emerged from the platform in smoke and darkness. It towered at seven feet and had the look of a demon from hell itself, red eyes on a smooth draconic face, and wielded an iron-chain whip to go along with the look of an underworld torturer. Its voice had been smooth enough that even its persistent echo felt soft on the
ears, if it wasn't always demanding that the students kill one another.

It had proclaimed itself as the servant of the 'new master' of Hope's Peak and that it had been delegated the powers to compel, punish, and reward students based on how they acted. There were few who ever had the courage to stand up to the demonic entity, Oowada's death had taken one of the names off that list, and it had been made clear from the start that any show of defiance towards Murralsee would be treated as an act of defiance against their captor.

Naegi wasn't going to let Murralsee force him to kill, and they would stop it and the Mastermind's plans, but he also wasn't going to martyr himself for a brief moment of defiance.

What everyone needed to do was stick together and find a way out of this. It was just Naegi's terrible luck that there was just as much bickering and grudge-holding as there was on the very first day that they all arrived at Hope's Peak. The Second Class Trial had only made things worse after Togami's interference with the crime scene.

*What was he even thinking?* Naegi already knew the answer to that question. The great Byakuya Togami, Ultimate Affluent Progeny, had said that he wanted to see who'd be the first to suspect him if he actually did commit a murder and who would come the closest to figuring him out.

That little plan of his almost cost him, and the others, everything. If Naegi and Kirigiri hadn't spotted the meaning in Oowada's words in time...

Now four of the remaining eleven survivors had locked themselves in their rooms and refused to speak with the rest of the class. Celes had taken that as an opportunity to retreat into her own room and everyone soon split off into their own groups seemingly without any intention of co-ordinating or discussing what they should do now. It wasn't as if Ishimaru was going to enforce discipline any time soon. Not after Oowada's death.

Naegi and Kirigiri had agreed to split up and try to coax the others out of their rooms. They had decided to give Ishimaru time to properly mourn and instead focus on the other three. Fukawa would follow Togami so it was just a matter of winning him over. Kirigiri agreed to be the one to try and sooth Togami's ego enough that he'd be able to face the class again, Naegi being a comforting face would probably backfire somehow and only wound his pride further.

So it was that Naegi was standing in front of the Ultimate Male Model's room trying to summon the courage to knock on the door and try to be let in.

This wasn't going to be easy. Everyone had rallied behind the idea of Togami being Fujisaki's killer not just because of his tampering of the crime scene, but also because of the fierce and unrelenting accusations of the Ultimate Male Model. The two had never gotten along and it was obvious in hindsight that the whole accusation was more motivated by what Togami said on the first day of this Mutual Killing Game than actual proof. That entire case had been built on coincidence and Togami's own mockery of everyone around him.

As if beating the Ultimate Progeny within an inch of his life wasn't enough.

It was a miracle that a fight hadn't broken out again. The first time had been the last; Oogami having made it clear that she wouldn't show any restraint against whoever would throw the first punch or were about to kill the other. The two simply settled for throwing passive insults at each other that were so cruel that it made even Celes uncomfortable.

Getting the two to get along was impossible, but Naegi was an optimist. If they wouldn't be friends, they could at least be classmates enough that they could be in the same room without screaming at
each other. If it could happen after half of Togami's face had been beaten black and blue, it could happen after a few moments of fearing for his life.

At least, that's what Naegi hoped.

He knocked three times on the door and waited for a reply. Luckily enough, the door opened after a few seconds and Naegi was now face-to-face, or rather face-to-pecs, with the Ultimate Male Model just mere hours after having kept him from making the biggest mistake of his life.

That didn't mean Naegi didn't start wondering if he just made that very mistake when he saw an unfriendly glare shoot far over his head. As the eyes looked down at Naegi, however, the ice-cold glare warmed into a welcoming fire that was complimented by the slight smile that appeared on the man's face. The effect was slightly undermined by the fact that Naegi had to crane his neck back just to look his classmate in the eye.

"Oh, Naegi. I thought you were someone else." The Ultimate Male Model said. The way he spoke in near-flawless Japanese made Naegi jealous at their language skills, while he had barely passed English at his old school. That wasn't the only thing that he was jealous of.

Makoto Naegi wasn't exactly known for his height. His own little sister was 3cm taller than him, as she loved to brag in the days before he got the letter from Hope's Peak, but he never exactly felt tiny. 5'4 was a perfectly respectable height. That's what he had thought.

That had been before he spent time with people like Oogami, Oowada, and the chiselled statue before him. The Ultimate Male Model was the tallest one of the class at 195cm, or 6'4 to use the Imperial measurements that the British used for height, and managed the impossible in seeming somehow even larger than that.

Perhaps it was the physique? It took a lot of hard work to create a body that bulged with such muscle and could still be considered slender. Any clothing worn by this man managed to fit just enough to display his physique without looking to tear at the materials themselves, creating the impression that the fabrics and design were solely for his use. Maybe it was the golden-blonde hair? Or perhaps the piercing red eyes that could either spell hellfire with their fury or a soft candle-light of curiosity as Naegi explained the differences between Japanese and British schools.

The days where a man's attractiveness was judged by having the muscular build like the one before Naegi had seemed to be over until recently. The Ultimate Male Model apparently discovered something that made him from an appreciated niche to the man who dominated the world of fashion. That was less than two years ago and now Naegi wondered if Komaru had bought another poster of her 'most favourite model ever', to put it in her words.

Dio Brando had that effect on women.

"Hey, Dio, I was just wondering if I could come in." Naegi said. It was better to be straight and honest with Dio than make up some lie that the older peer would easily see through. "I know it's been a long day, but after what happened-"

Dio's grip on the door tightened, the sound of wood creaking echoing throughout the hall. "If you're asking me to apologise to Togami-"

"No, I'm not stupid." Naegi replied, a bit too quickly for his own liking. It seemed to work, however, as Dio let go of the door and leaned against it. "If you're asking me to apologise to Togami-"

"No, I'm not stupid." Naegi replied, a bit too quickly for his own liking. It seemed to work, however, as Dio let go of the door and leaned against it. "Gah! Even when he was wearing a simple combination of a white shirt, chocolate-brown trousers, and a dark-blue sweater, Dio managed to turn leaning against a door into a pose that had a gravity of its own. As it drew Naegi in closer, he
knew that he had to regain control of the conversation. "I just wanted to make sure that you're okay. Kirigiri and I kind of went all-in during that trial and I don't want you to think that-"

A hand the size of Naegi's head was slowly raised in front of his face and he took the hint.

"Naegi," Dio leaned back and pushed the door further open enough that both of them could easily enter and exit his room. Any trace of hostility on his face was gone and replaced by cheerful welcoming, the hand that had been raised towards Naegi now motioning to the inside of the room. "If we're going to talk, we should probably do it sitting down. It'd be nice to have some kind of friendly talk after today."

Every bedroom for the students had been designed according to their personal tastes. For Dio, it was the very embodiment of luxury and wealth that fitted someone who conquered their field at the age of seventeen, right down to the golden sheen that flooded the room just from the decoration of the place. You would have never imagined that, only two years ago, this was a man who had been rejected from Hope's Peak.

But that was a story for another time. Right now, Naegi's priority was making sure that Dio knew that he was still part of their group.

The two of them sat at the table in perfect contrast. Dio sat on his chair and leaned forward as if he was the one who was checking up on Naegi rather than the other way round, pouring himself a glass of wine from the bottle he procured, and gently holding it with one hand. He let it sway and swish in his grip as if mocking Murralsee by defying the school environment. Dio had justified it to Ishimaru-who had wanted to confiscate it-in that he found it and Britain had different drinking laws to Japan so it was fine so long as only he drank it.

Ishimaru had brought up the subject again and again after the first day, but did nothing to forcibly remove the wine on the silent condition that Dio would keep it in his room at all times and that no one else would drink it. The fact that it had been a couple of hours after Dio's fists had been bloodied might have played a part in the Ultimate Moral Compass deciding to pick his battles.

"I don't suppose you'd like some?" Dio asked, moving his hand so that the open bottle was now leaning towards Naegi's face.

"No thanks. I'm too young to drink." That and the scent itself was enough to make him feel woozy, let alone even a sip.

"Suit yourself," Dio said. Silence took over for a few moments, Naegi trying to find the right words to say, when Dio took the initiative. "If you want to make sure that I was fine, I can assure you that I hold no grudges towards you or Kirigiri over what happened in the trial. We merely differed on details and I turned out to be in the wrong. I, Dio, am not the kind of person who wails and howls when they make a genuine mistake and are corrected."

Naegi ignored the implicit remark about Togami and focused on the real matter at hand. "It's these Class Trials. Forcing us to fight each other over who's the murderer. It just brings out the worst in all of us."

"Not all of us. Once again, you've surpassed yourself." Dio said, catching the Ultimate Lucky Student off-guard. What did he mean by that? "Naegi, do you remember what I said a few days ago?"

Despite everything that happened today, Naegi could remember the day before yesterday with picture-perfect clarity. Dio had been one of the few people who hadn't assumed the worst about
Naegi when Maizono had been murdered, taking his side just as Kirigiri did during the whole Class Trial, so it made sense to give him a thank-you present. Naegi's luck had kicked in when he got Prince Shoutoku's Globe from the Murralsee Machine. He smiled when he saw that the softball-sized globe had been kept right next to Dio's mirror.

The gift worked as an ice-breaker and the two had talked about the strange circumstances of their acceptance into Hope's Peak. Naegi having gone through the worst day in his life and Dio having been approved despite being two years older than the standard age of entry. It had seemed odd, but no one would have said that Dio Brando didn't deserve to be a part of the student body. Reading the comments on the boards, most people thought it was a mistake to have not let him in earlier.

After they compared hobbies and skills, Naegi wondered if the reason for Dio's rejection was that he had too many talents. The Ultimate Male Model wasn't just a pretty face but was one of the sharpest fighters that Naegi had ever seen. He had seen Dio win in his games of chess against Celes and Kirigiri before, so he knew that he was smart, and the muscles should have been a dead giveaway, but he never expected the kind of skill Dio spoke about.

"I knew the basics of boxing from my childhood. No one in the streets could match me in a fight. It was when I rose to fame that I turned experience and street-smarts into something more." Dio had said, showing Naegi some air-boxing. "Mixed Martial Arts was popular and I, Dio, wasn't one to reject the opportunities to better myself, although I have my preferred forms."

Naegi knew what those were. Boxing. Not the Olympic style, or even the professional style, but a style that seemed design to hurt and cripple your opponents. It was vicious and cruel, made to keep the other fighter down and out before they came after you, and Dio somehow made it stylish. The only one in their class that Dio could really show his might against, without getting hurt, let alone winning as she did, was Oogami.

And it's not like Dio doesn't try to win. Naegi thought to himself. At times, it seemed like Dio was trying too hard to come out on top, as if winning was more important than keeping your opponent safe.

"It's hard to find a worthy opponent. I've even had a few rounds against the Ultimate Boxer." Dio had said, eager to move on from his loss. "That's a story for a different time. Let's simply say that pride might have played a role in why I was named Ultimate Male Model instead of Ultimate Boxer."

The main thing that Naegi remembered, however, was the question that Dio posed to him. The question he asked Naegi to contemplate when they had gone over the list of his potential 'talents'.

"You asked me who I thought had the strongest Talent." Naegi said.

"I can understand why you might not have thought about it. What must sound like harmless trivia is nothing compared to solving a murder, especially when it's all of our lives at stake. But this is an important question. The strongest Talent just might be what liberates all of us in the end."

"You've got that wrong." Naegi couldn't contain himself. "Talent isn't what's going to get us out of here. Working together and refusing to go along with Murralsee's little game is what will get us out of here."

Dio's eyes narrowed slightly, but more than enough to almost make Naegi shake in his seat. "Murralsee is only the face we see. Never forget that there is a Mastermind pulling the strings to all of this. A Mastermind that has managed to create a fortress that even the Ultimate Fighter herself couldn't break."
"Exactly. There's no single Talent that's going to come and bring us to safety. All we can do is hope. Hope in each other, for the people outside trying to rescue us, and that it's all going to work out."

Naegi felt his body swell with each word, growing stronger in his stance and more confident in his voice. That was until he realised that he still needed to give his answer, causing him to deflate and shuffle in place. "Besides, and I don't mean to be rude, but your question doesn't make sense."

Maybe it was just his natural tendency to want everyone to get along, but the intrigued look on Dio's face, asking him to explain himself without a hint of offence, put Naegi at ease. It wasn't the first time that Naegi was relieved that he could speak with Dio while Kirigiri was stuck trying to make Togami re-join the group after everything that happened. Just the two talking was enough to give the Ultimate Lucky Student some peace of mind.

Not enough peace of mind to avoid stuttering as he began to talk. "W-Well, I mean, just, what are we even defining as 'strongest'? Are you asking if everyone got in a fight who'd win? Or are you asking which Talent is more useful? Or just which Talent goes further in their field? People have different uses for different skills. That's not even getting into the person themselves. Judging them on Talent alone is like judging someone based only on their looks, it's just one of many sides to a person. You can't really assign some objective strength to Talent. It's like asking who'd win in a fight. Where are they? How is their health? Is one of them willing to cheat to win?"

"So your answer is that it depends?" Dio asked. It was the kind of question that was a reply in itself, making Naegi wonder if the older man was disappointed that he went with an easy answer.

Naegi tried to retreat into his hoodie without making it obvious, suddenly embarrassed by his own words. "Sorry. You probably wanted something else from m-"

"I was hoping you would say that. It shows that your mind is sharp even when you're not under pressure." Dio smiled as he went on. "The skills needed to be a good king and the skills needed to be a good chef are completely different. To judge the strength of a Talent according to some sort of objective criteria is a fool's task. Having said this, I, Dio, have thought about who would represent the biggest danger to the Mastermind in this Mutual Killing Game."

"Y-Y-You have?"

"The Mastermind has control over the entire school and has copies of Murralsee all over the building just waiting to be activated. They then add to this control by having us fight amongst each other with the reward of escaping this building at the cost of everyone else. The Motives so far have simply been ways of increasing the costs of inaction. It might be that they even have the power to provide additional benefits to successfully committing a murder other than freedom."

*Murdering someone to get a reward?* Naegi didn't understand. He couldn't understand. What kind of reward would be enough to drive one of them to kill another, and doom everyone else, for the sake of what was basically a bonus prize? To kill to escape, that was something that Naegi could accept, no matter how much he hated it. To kill out of panic was wrong but at least it didn't come from a morbid cost-benefit calculation.

Even as Dio continued talking, Naegi refused to believe that someone would jump at whatever Murralsee-or rather the Mastermind-offered in exchange for an innocent life.

"With that power as the foundation to all this, it stands to reason that those that threaten the Mastermind's control are the greatest threats. Without that power over us, there is nothing they can do to force us to submit to their will. In this case, out of our entire class, the three most dangerous would be Oogami, Fujisaki, and Kirigiri herself. The Ultimate Fighter may only have a small chance of defeating a single Murralsee, but the Ultimate Programmer might have had a chance to access one of
the Murralsees, or even the network itself, and bring chaos to the Mastermind's control. Kirigiri herself has proven resistant to the Motives and the paranoia that comes from murder. Even without a clear Talent, she's proven deadly."

"Fujisaki," Naegi's eyes feeling heavy, still fighting back tears even now. The fact that he might have found a way to help everyone escape. As if the way he died wasn't tragic enough. "Even if it was a small chance, why did-"

"Because Oowada was ruled by fear. Fear of what he had done, fear of what his followers would think of him, and fear of his own weakness. Humanity is haunted by anxiety, Naegi, and will do anything to find refuge from it, even if it means burying their sins deep down." Dio drank from his glass again and leaned forward, his very form seeming to grow even larger somehow. "That anxiety of the unknown, great enough to throw them into despair and madness, is what defines those who are the least threatening to the Mastermind."

"The least threatening?"

"Yamada, Hagakure, Maizono, Kuwata, Oowada, Fukawa, Togami, and now Ishimaru." Dio listed the names without hesitation. Alive, dead, culprit, victim, none of that seemed to matter. Only the distinction between a threat and a tool. "Those either willing to submit to the Mastermind's commands or are unable to overcome their own fears and anxiety to truly resist. Some will be unable to kill while also refusing to fight back against the Mastermind or their Murralsees in any worthwhile way. They are the mob mentality. Give them a direction and they'll flock towards it."

"What about the others?" Naegi felt uneasy. It was as if Dio was creating a list of the worthy and the unworthy. Those who he thought would survive and overcome the Mutual Killing Game, and those who he thought were doomed the moment they entered Hope's Peak. It wasn't right, and it was made all the worse by the fact that there were names missing from the list. "Me, Asahina, and Celes."

"Asahina and Oogami give each other stability and strength. I doubt anything will drive them to actually kill so long as they have each other. What happens if one of them is murdered, however, is what will determine the extent to which they threaten the Mastermind's designs now. The Ultimate Gambler's Talent is what makes her dangerous. How much of it is likes yours? The Talent with the greatest potential."

"Mine? The greatest potential?" Naegi couldn't believe it, even as Dio said that last sentence as if it were a basic fact. Something as obvious as the order of the alphabet.

But that couldn't be the case. Yes, Naegi had been given the title Ultimate Lucky Student, yet that was only because that was what every winner of the Lottery was called. It wasn't as if Naegi only ever had good luck. If anything, he had been cursed with terrible luck. The day he got his letter had only been after a whole series of problems and failures that made him ready to give up on things getting better until he got home and Komaru revealed that letter. He'd been so happy that the whole day had went from one of the worst to one of the best days of his life.

_Until I actually came to the school._ Naegi thought to himself. What was meant to be the start of a new life with new friends had turned into him and fourteen others into tortured victims. Nothing more than pawns in some sick and twisted game, all controlled by a Mastermind whose reach and power seemed endless to those locked inside the Academy.

This was a talent with the greatest potential?

"Ultimate Lucky Student. The Talent that seems capable of changing the nature of probability itself. If you were somehow able to attain control of that Talent." Dio drank the last of his wine in his glass,
as if to show his calm, yet the way his other hand gripped itself showed how focused he truly was. "You could become a challenge for even the Mastermind. It's why the Ultimate Gambler might be more dangerous than she seems. What if her skills don't simply lie in her ability to create and see through lies, but to also alter the luck of the draw? She could be a powerful weapon against the Mastermind, or a tool for them to use to break everyone here."

"Being able to control luck." Naegi tasted the words in his mouth before shaking his head at the thought. It was just too ridiculous for someone like him. He apologetically scratched the back of his head. "I'm sorry, Dio. That's something I could never do. Not for someone ordinary like me."

Dio shrugged his shoulders. "I thought as much. Your temperament betrays you. It's not in the nature of Givers to attempt to surpass those kinds of limitations."

_Givers? What does he mean by that?_ Naegi was confused. Dio seemed to reach for the wine bottle to pour more into his glass, only to stop himself in a flash, his eyes bursting with raw energy. Energy that was pushed down and Dio's whole form seemed to be in a state of forced calm. He smiled at Naegi with a near-perfect serenity.

After hearing Dio's words, it almost made Naegi wonder if the Ultimate Model was mocking him. Asserting his superiority without realising it, or maybe just not saying it, by simply just being himself. Togami was straight with how he felt, declaring his disdain and perception of others as lower than him without shame, almost bathing in their reactions. As much as Togami liked to talk about not trusting others and approaching this as a game to play and win, he was one of the more honest people about his feelings.

Dio? Dio Brando made you feel inferior by simply being in the same room as him. The way his body just naturally posed and leaned in ways that emphasised his body structure, his way of cutting through or slipping around your words and dominating the conversation, and just how his sheer self-confidence almost came to life and flooded whatever room he was in. Without even saying a word, Dio could make himself seem like the most important, and the most superior, person in the room.

"Givers are people like yourself. They open themselves to others and invite them to take what they desire. If they saw someone trapped in quicksand, they wouldn't hesitate to do everything possible to get the victim out, even if it were to cost them their own lives." Dio said. It almost seemed as if he was mocking Naegi, if it weren't for the level tone. "They just give and give until there's nothing left. Then they try to give more until they are nothing more than a broken husk."

"You think I'm going to die because I'm open to people?" Naegi asked.

"You seem incapable of comprehending the idea that there are people in this building who lack your morality. That there is no one who decide that freedom from this prison is worth the lives of everyone else here. That people cannot be selfish." Dio leaned back in his seat. "It's often a Taker that destroys them. Maizono almost did it to you."

That made Naegi's chest burst with anger. Maizono wasn't that kind of person. Her dying message had been what saved Naegi and the rest of the class from certain death and Dio was sitting there calling her a 'taker'? Thinking of her as the kind of person that destroyed people who were willing to help others? It almost made him want to stand up and scream in her defence.

What kept Naegi restrained was first his own reluctance to get violent, and secondly the fear of what would happen if he tried to lay a hand on the Ultimate Model. The memory of what Dio had done to Togami on their first day still stuck with Naegi just as it did with everyone else. One second, Togami was coldly dismissing Dio in front of the group, and the next was seeing Togami's head smashed against the side of the bleachers before his whole body was thrown to the ground. He had barely
been able to get up before Dio pounced on him, raining down blow after blow, screaming about the audacity of the Ultimate Progeny's words.

If it wasn't for Oogami locking in that full-nelson and Oowada grabbing at the legs, Naegi wondered if anything would have stopped Dio from murdering Togami out of sheer fury. Murasaki almost had his first murder literally seconds after he had declared the start of the Mutual Killing Game. The attack even left its mark now, the bruises that coated Togami's right eye were showing no matter how much make-up he used, and was a constant reminder of the dangers of pushing Dio's buttons.

Either way, Dio seemed to realise the tension in the room and raised his hands as a conciliatory gesture.

"I don't mean to insult her. I'm a Taker as well." Dio's spoke softly. Softly enough that it made Naegi feel like he was a child nearing a temper tantrum, having to be soothed into silence. He almost blushed from shame, although that dissipated when seeing Dio rise from his seat, his chair falling to the ground. "Anything in this world, anyone within it, I will use on my path to the top. I, Dio, will not die in this school-building from the machinations of a figure hiding in the darkness who thinks that we are starving rats."

There was something about the determination in his voice, the strength behind those words, that lent Dio the kind of charisma that a general had when leading soldiers into battle in olden times. The confidence that everything would end in their victory and that the enemy would be defeated. It made Naegi's chest swell with something. Not quite hope, this was something raw and furious, but it warmed the Ultimate Lucky Student all the same.

That sheer confidence of self. It made Naegi wonder if, although neither would ever admit it, Dio and Togami ever realised that they were more alike than they-

"Byakuya Togami is an Inheritor." Dio spat out that last word with enough venom that Naegi shivered from the feel of the poison. "All the trials and challenges I have faced began when I was nothing more than a child stuck in the dirt. Everything I became was a result of my own efforts and being, climbing to new heights and only going higher. A boy like Togami. He was born on top of the mountain and is praised for adding pennies to a sea of gold. He thinks harsh words and sharp glares will make him one worthy of fear and respect. He and I are nothing alike."

The same sense of confidence and determination was there, but it had been altered. Words of comfort had become words of resentful fury. The room turned ice-cold and threatened to freeze Naegi in place, no matter how he wore his hoodie. The loathing in Dio's voice was a reminder of the other side of Dio's passions and emotions. How he could get swept up in them just as easily as he could use them. Where it might have scared others off, and Naegi would never deny the fear inside him when seeing Dio like this, a part of him wanted to understand where this came from.

Where did Dio create this image of the world as one of givers, takers, and inheritors? Why did he seem to take pride in being a 'taker', look down on 'givers', and hold a special contempt for 'inheritors'? The questions in Naegi's mind mixed with the tempest of Dio's fury and nearly overwhelmed Naegi. Dio at least seemed to realised this in time and the spite and fury seeped back towards Dio and away from the room, and Naegi, just as quickly as it burst out.

"Forgive me, Naegi. I'm afraid that Togami has a tendency to..." Dio stopped himself, whether lacking a word to describe his feelings, or trying to find a way to phrase it that didn't scare Naegi. "Push my buttons, so to say. My temper is one of my less attractive features."

"It's fine. I think Togami pushes everyone's buttons." Naegi said. It wasn't his place to sit and judge Dio when he didn't know all the details, and it wasn't as if Togami didn't drive everyone else into
madness. Apart from Fukawa, of course. "Just try to not let him get to you. We're all in the same situation and we can't just start fighting with each other. You're my friend, Dio, and I just want to make sure that this doesn't get any worse. Now that we've got the Ultimate Serial Killer here, and Togami thinking that you're trying to kill him-

"I'm equipped to handle the Genocider." Dio said. Any other person smiling the way that Dio was and Naegi would have been worried that their ego was in control. Just by following where Dio's eyes were looking, at the pepper-shaker that Dio had apparently taken from the kitchen, Naegi could see that the Ultimate Model was well-prepared. That was ignoring the fact that he had every physical advantage against someone like Fukawa. "But I understand your point. Murralsee's next motive could be aimed at bringing up past grudges and, if there is another murder, it wouldn't do us any good if Togami and Fukawa were focusing on getting back at me than discovering the truth."

Dio was probably trying to comfort Naegi, but all that he could think about were those last few words. "You really think there'll be more deaths?"

"Possibly." Dio said. "That's a matter for tomorrow. Is the rest of the class meeting now? I won't apologise to Togami, but I almost got everyone killed."

"Everyone's already forgiven you for that." Naegi replied, finding his smile. In all honesty, no one really blamed Dio. All he did was lead them down a path that they were happy to go down. The only two that really held a grudge was Togami and Fukawa and it wasn't as if Dio was ever going to win them over after their first day. "Just try and be in the same room as Togami and Fukawa without a fight breaking out."

"I'll try my best." Dio met Naegi's smile with his own, before shifting his gaze over to the clock. "It's getting close to the Night Time. Unless you want to end up breaking the curfew rule-

Naegi turned his back and held back a gasp of shock at how late it truly was. The Class Trial had taken a lot of time, as did trying to get everyone to stay together before he and Kirigiri focused on Togami and Dio, but he never realised just how long it had been between the beginning of the trial and now. He all but threw himself out of the chair and tried to get a closer look at the specific time. He still had enough time to get out and actually talk with Kirigiri about how it all went.

He just prayed that someone like Fukawa wouldn't notice him leaving Dio's room at this time. Komaru was one of millions of Dio Brando fangirls who looked at his latest pictures with yearning, but that didn't mean that he was exclusively loved by women. There was just something about Dio in every pose and style of clothing that just drew people in, regardless of gender. It was like the Ultimate Model had his own gravity. Naegi, however, was not that kind of admirer and he did not want Fukawa to latch onto the idea that he and Dio were having that kind of relationship.

If he was quick, and Kirigiri was either finishing up or waiting for him, then Naegi could get out and go over things with Kirigiri without anyone asking questions. He was at least grateful that Dio didn't seem to take offence to how quickly he was scrambling to leave the room. Spending time in dorms had taught everyone the value of not having to worry about neighbours prying into your business, even without a Mutual Killing Game hanging over everyone's heads.

Naegi was just about ready to leave when he felt something in the back pocket of his hoodie press against his waist.

*How did I forget?* Naegi had even intended this to serve as a peace offering. A way to win Dio over in case he had been more hostile than he really was. It had cost Naegi a lot of coins on the Murralsee Machine to get but it would all be worth it, if those online boards were telling the truth all those weeks ago. He ruffled through his pockets for the present.
"Dio, I actually wanted to give you something."

It confused Naegi on why the machine seemed to distribute presents. Yes, they were wrapped in a pure black ball which a tiny Murraalsee face on it—which made each 'prize' seem more like a nightmare—but it seemed like a strange gesture of kindness for the Mastermind to give them some type of normality. Kirigiri had suggested that it was a way to make them let their guard down, or a sick way for a murderer to build trust before betraying them all. Naegi preferred to think that this was just a mind-game and nothing more.

A mind game that was really helpful in giving him presents to give to others. Such as the one he handed over to Dio, who was looking at the brooch that seemed tiny when in his hands.

"The Scarab Beetle. Ancient Egypt's symbol of the cycle of regeneration and rebirth and of the God Ra's command over the sun." Dio said to himself, looking at the present with glowing eyes. It seemed as if Naegi handled it perfectly. Until Dio's eyes narrowed and gave a sideways glance at Naegi. "Also known as the dung beetle."

It was almost enough to make Naegi wail in panic. The Scarab and the dung beetle were the same insect? How did that work? One was a symbol of wealth and fortune and the other pushed around a ball of poop! It was impossible. It was unthinkable. It was Naegi's bad luck. Dio was probably wondering if Naegi was trying to make some joke about him, someone who tried to reach for glory but was only covered in their own mess, knowing how his luck went.

Naegi was about to shoot out an apology when Dio's eyes softened again and a gentle laugh came from his lips. The smile on his face suggested that Dio knew exactly what he did.

"I like it. It's not going anywhere near my hair, but I appreciate the gesture." Dio said. He was speaking to Naegi but his eyes were completely focused on the scarab brooch in his hands. "The Egyptian culture's always fascinated me. From the dawn of man to the present day itself. The idea of a ruler as a God themselves."

Dio spoke softly and with admiration for what the brooch seemed to represent for him. The good mood was infectious enough to wipe away Naegi's earlier fears and brought a smile to his face as well, comforted by the fact that the internet did not lie to him, and that he hadn't wrecked his work. Dio could be aggressive and let his grudges get the better of him, but he had been a strong ally in trying to keep the class united and Naegi didn't want to lose that because of a few mistakes. softly smiled,

"Great. I'll bring something new the next time we meet, Dio. Maybe I can test my luck on the machines." Naegi said, emphasising the part about his luck.

The joke failed miserably.

It was a small mercy that Dio didn't seemed to notice Naegi's attempt at humour. He gave a smile and a wave from where he stood, as Naegi moved towards the door. "Don't worry, Naegi. I, Dio, won't let us fall to the Mastermind just yet. Not when we still have a chance at victory."

The two nodded at each other, Naegi feeding off Dio's natural confidence. It helped that the massive height difference was lessened by Dio being halfway across the room from him, instead of one having to look down and the other forcing their neck back. He opened the door and closed it behind him, looking to his right to see if Kirigiri was waiting for him. It was some kind of cosmic joke that, for all that the two hated one another, Dio and Togami's rooms were only separated by Celes' room. Well, he said cosmic joke, but it was really more a favour from the heavens.
Just as Naegi wondered if his partner had decided to head back to her room, Kirigiri herself exited Togami's room and shut the door behind her. Compared to him and Dio giving a warm farewell, all the girl with the unknown Talent gave Togami was a brief stare and a nod, as she closed the door. Without even changing expression, Kirigiri turned her head towards Naegi.

"I doubt that this experience has made Togami any more willing to involve himself in the group." She said. A chill crept up Naegi's spine before she spoke again. "But he won't be excluding himself any more than he already has. He also won't be attempting to avenge himself on Dio. The physical difference is enough to deter him and using Genocider Syo is too much of a risk for him, I presume."

"At least tomorrow will be better than today." As if that was going to be hard.

"Possibly. Or Fukawa and/or Ishimaru's reaction to today's events may make things worse. We've done all we can, assuming you manage to convince Brando to not isolate himself." Kirigiri had a way of coming off as brutally honest while also trying to be comforting. It was a strange combination but one that worked on Naegi.

As the clock moved closer to the Night Time, both Naegi and Kirigiri decided to head back to their rooms and place their trust in their classmates. There was still the question of whether Genocider Syo was going to be a threat to the safety of the group, and if Ishimaru was going to be any better than he was today after Oowada's death. There was only so much that could be done in a single day though, and Naegi and Kirigiri had done all they could in that time, and they could be proud of that.

Naegi even felt that he and Dio bonded a little.

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Peace of mind. To be free of fear and anxiety. The true reason for which humans live their lives.

The pursuit of wealth, fame, power, all of these are done so that the one who attain them can gain peace of mind. To form relationships with others is done so that people can have peace of mind. When one offers aid to someone in need, or vows to live by the virtues of love, justice, and honour, they do so to have peace of mind. That sense of security and safety is something that no man or woman can truly resist.

Offer it to them and they will do anything to have it. Threaten to take it away and they will fight to their last breath to keep it.

What was hope but the desire to fulfil one's fate? To live a life that is free of the unexpected and chaotic? To avoid the pain of suffering or turmoil?

Take away that hope, that sense of stability, and throw a group into a situation where peace of mind is impossible and they would be ruined. The lowest of beggars, the greatest of kings, and the last remaining pillars of Hope's Peak Academy, all of them were equal in the face of these basic facts. The symbols that so much of mankind put their faith and hope in would crumble into common killers and tragic victims in a matter of days.

Who could question that fact now? An entire planet was forced to watch as these children, unknowingly carrying the burden of being the last hope of millions, were like lemmings. Incapable of overcoming instinct, they rushed to the edge of the cliff and towards their death.

But there were other factors in play! Just as that famous fact about the lemming was no more than a fabrication by documentary-makers interfering in the course of nature, so too was this Mutual Killing Game being manipulated as well. A Mastermind that gave them gentle pushes towards the right
direction by the use of motives.

An eternity in the building they could not escape. The lives of their loved ones. Their darkest secrets. These dark threats, handed down by what looked like a demon itself, were more than enough to drive those who were meant to be kept safe behind these walls into their own greatest enemies.

Who could feel peace of mind in a place like this?

The answer was obvious. Peace of mind came from freedom from fear and anxiety, from a sense of total control over their lives and fate, and that belonged to one man. The Mastermind of this Mutual Killing Game. The man behind the rise of Ultimate Despair, the terrorist group dedicated to the destruction of Hope's Peak and all its works. The man who had taken the old order and crushed it beneath his heels. The man who would soon take his rightful place as the ruler of all mankind.

The man who could no longer contain his laughter after hearing Makoto Naegi close the door behind him. His entire body arched backwards as he put a hand over his face, nowhere near close enough to cover up the sounds coming from his mouth.

Why even try to contain it? The rooms were soundproofed, after all. The Mastermind could have screamed all of his deeds for the outside world to hear and his next-door neighbour wouldn't have heard a single thing. Even if she did, it wasn't as if the Mastermind's very own loyal servant would actually rise up against him. Not when he offered her the very peace of mind that he himself enjoyed.

Dio Brando looked at the Scarab Brooch in his hand and grinned. The Ultimate Lucky Student's Talent had worked in Dio's favour again. With his control over Murralsee, the chosen avatar for Dio's will, there was nothing to stop Dio from attaining such a thing for himself, the same applying to the Globe itself. It was the principle of the matter, however, that gave Dio pleasure. The further vindication of his decision to directly interact with the others as a friendly face.

It was true that his illusion had come under threat. Byakuya Togami's arrogance, enough that he had the audacity to challenge one such as Dio, had almost sent the plan crashing down. Had it not been for the Ultimate Fighter and Oowada, Dio would have killed Togami with his bare hands. The others would have seen him as a murderer and realised that Murralsee had not called for a Class Trial.

The chain of logic would have been unbreakable. If Murralsee was only a servant, as the machine itself admitted, then the only thing that it would never threaten would be its master. Dio had no problem with ending the game, if it ever came close to ruining his plans, but he would have preferred some progress to be made in his wider scheme.

It was not enough to merely kill Class 78 of Hope's Peak Academy, the students that Jin Kirigiri had tried so hard to keep alive and safe. If it was, then Dio would have slaughtered them the second that they had all let their guards down. No. There needed to be something more. Something that would show the world that there was truly nothing left that Dio Brando did not hold power over.

Perhaps I, Dio, should begin work on the next murders. Dio already had a plan. With this, he would be able to kill two birds with one stone by testing a theory of his.

Making Taeko Yasuhiro into his servant had been easy. His natural charisma and physical appearance had cowed many women towards his will, especially when complimented by the threat of violence, but there was something more that Dio could use. The darkest secrets, once easily confessed to fellow classmates who had enjoyed the strong ties of friendship, now tormented each and every one of them. Old friends were now strangers who could barely be trusted.

The stick of revealing her true identity and destroying the idea of Celestia Ludenberg had been
enough to break Taeko. It was the carrot of her dream-castle, however, which built her up again into a willing mole for Dio to use against the others. All of this had been done to test Dio's theory about the Luck aspect of her Ultimate Gambler Talent. Every variable had to be controlled and, if Taeko indeed had some power over luck, and thus probability, then Dio finally had a weapon against Naegi.

If not, and Taeko was caught, then there was no risk to Dio himself. Murralsee would silence her before she could reveal his identity.

Already, Dio Brando was taking control of the next battlefield. He was dominating the war that people like Naegi and Kirigiri were only just starting to fight. Chihiro Fujisaki, one of the few who stood as a threat, had been brutally dispatched and Kirigiri was no closer to discovering her true Talent than she was when the Killing Game began. All that left was Sakura Oogami. The woman who dared to humiliate Dio in single combat.

He had agreed in the expectation that his greater knowledge of her tactics and stances would have given him the edge. Instead, he was defeated! How would the world know to fear him if he could still be matched physically? Had the ogre held back during their schooldays, thinking that she was merely encouraging a friend? The thought destroyed Dio's good mood and made his blood boil with fury.

The only thing that calmed him was the thought of revenge. Just as the urge to end Togami whenever the brat opened his mouth was soothed by when the Final Trial would begin, the same applied to Oogami. When it would come to the final chapter in this little story, Dio would force Oogami to watch as he would break her beloved comrades into his puppets before sending her to the pits of hell. All the strength she took pride in would be nothing against the power of Dio Brando!

It wouldn't be long now. The time was coming when the remnants of Hope's Peak Academy would learn the truth about the world, the truth about their pasts, and why they were brought here in the first place. The realisation that they had not only been killing innocent people but also their close friends. The destruction of all their hopes and the end to seemingly any chance of peace of mind. It would break every single one of them.

As the survivors would break, so would the world.

Then that would be when Dio would make them his offer. The chance for them to attain peace of mind again. To live in a world where their dreams and desires could still be reached. All that they would have to do would be to accept Dio's total victory over them and the world, and kneel before him in unconditional submission.

Dio would then take the Talents that rightfully belonged to him, instead of that pathetic failed experiment, and transcend another barrier. The Future Foundation, who still dared to challenge Dio's rule, would have nothing to rally the people with. In the face of Dio's army, from Ultimate Despair to the Warriors of Hope to his spy to even his loyal friend who had helped him on the path towards his Fate, his enemies would either join the world in kneeling at Dio's feet or become stepping stones on his way to total domination of mankind.

Makoto Naegi. Kyouko Kirigiri. Those two made a formidable team, capable of besting any other opponent in a situation like this, if given time.

"But this is not any other opponent, Makoto Naegi, Kyouko Kirigiri." Dio spoke loudly. No one else inside Hope's Peak could hear him, but the entire world outside couldn't mistake even a single word now. "I, Dio, will conquer you just as I have conquered this planet! You think you can overcome the power of Dio Brando? Hah! Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless!"
The master of humanity laughed. The raw sense of triumph flooded his room until it needed some kind of escape, bursting through the cameras, and seeping into every single screen that was broadcasting this Mutual Killing Game throughout the globe. It was impossible to know just how many people were witnessing these events. All that could be certain was that they were witnessing the total confidence of the man who had all but taken over the world, and was it wrong to think that he had in fact already taken over the world?

For who could even think of challenging the Ultimate Master?

Chapter End Notes

For those who haven't figured it out, I've replaced the Despair Sisters with Dio Brando, or at least the Danganronpa-version of Dio Brando.

So this was inspired by a lot of things but mainly the fact that JoJo's Bizarre Adventure is a setting that works really well in crossing over into other medias, but especially Danganronpa. I'd say Persona is one of the few that works just as well/better. Both JJBA and DR have that mixture of an almost-camp atmosphere but a willingness as well to go into dark territory and kill off beloved characters. Apart from Hope-Arc, but that's a whole other kettle of fish.

Murralsee is this universe's version of Monokuma because Dio does not deal in teddy bears. The design is based on the cover of 'Holy Diver', the first album of the band Dio, the JJBA character's namesake, which introduced the band mascot Murralsee aka "Murray".

If this isn't a one-shot, it'll be a series of snippets that takes us from Dio deciding to end the world to this universe's version of DR3, and updates won't be by a schedule. I've got ideas for where DR1, DR2, UDG, and DR3 go but that's a topic for a different time.

I might do a reverse-scenario of this i.e. Junko and Mukuro replace Dio in Phantom Blood, Stardust Crusaders, and Stone Ocean, and see how the two's characters would work in JJBA, but that's another project for another time.
Kirigiri was getting nowhere.

It was midnight, meaning she had spent two hours on this, and she still couldn't decipher the meaning of Celestia's final words.

Yes, Kirigiri still called the Ultimate Gambler 'Celestia', rather than 'Taeko', as part of her respect towards the dead. Was it entirely deserved to a murderer who had killed two people instead of the necessary one? Perhaps not, but Maizono had attempted to frame Naegi, Kuwata had gone beyond self-defence in the use of his tool-kit and Oowada allowed his emotional turmoil to remove one of the few people who could have truly challenged the Mastermind, yet were still deserved that respect. Why not the Ultimate Gambler?

The fact that she was working for the Mastermind was the best counter to that logic.

She hadn't expected that a girl of such pride would so readily discard it for the man who kept them locked away from the outside world and forced them to kill each other. Celestia's dream of being the mistress of her own castle might have been used against her, but to have debauched herself the way she did in her confession was simply nothing more than an act of submission. Had she thought that it would spare her an execution?

No. She clearly didn't fear death. Kirigiri thought to herself. Yet even that wasn't entirely the truth. She didn't fear death because she thought the Mastermind would rescue her from it.

Whatever the Mastermind had said to Celestia, it had been enough to turn him into a figure capable of creating what looked to be the world's greatest prison into nothing less than a God, and a God that demanded worship at that. Such actions did fit the profile that she had been creating for the Mastermind. It was one of the few ways that Kirigiri could actually gain progress in the war instead of fighting battle after battle.

The fact that Celestia was chosen as the Traitor, and not someone like Oogami or Togami, made it clear that the Mastermind had a clear preference. Oogami's physical strength—and more importantly her personality—would have made it difficult to pin her down as a deceiver, and Togami's fixation on labelling this whole thing as a game worked in reverse, making him too obvious as a culprit or a Traitor. The Second Class Trial had only been an exercise in venting frustration and trying to fit proof into a false answer.

Egotism. That was what kept the Mastermind from using someone like the two of them. Oogami was the Ultimate Fighter; meaning that the Mastermind would have to resort to hostages and/or a set of Murralsees to keep her in line. Togami would need something related to the fortune of the Togami Group, or an incentive, in order to keep him in line. For a criminal that had his own avatar proclaim itself as nothing more than a servant, the challenge to his pride would be too much to use either someone physically stronger than them or who'd see himself as an equal or greater.
Celestia's final testimony had been enlightening. At least, for as long as she was able to speak, before Murralsee chose to deliver a quick end. The need to frighten and horrify the Class had came behind the need to silence the pawn that was not only out-living its usefulness but was sabotaging her own side. In terms of getting ahead on the case, Kirigiri wasn't going to complain.

"You think we could ever defeat someone like him? Bullshit! You haven't seen his power the way I have. There is nothing he does not know. Nothing he cannot do. You think the Mutual Killing Game is the extent of his control? He is the man who could burn this world to ash and build it again! Life? Death? Both of them are nothing against his power! Just cut yourselves open and let him win, for all the good it'll do. I go to my death knowing that I will be re-born as-

Her speech had ended with Murralsee casting his steel whip forward and wrapping it around her throat. There was nothing she could do or say as the demon-shaped machine tightened the metallic noose around her throat and it was a matter of seconds before the crack of breaking bones echoed throughout the room. The Queen of Liars' body fell to the floor as if it were a sack of potatoes and just laid there.

Dio had tried to be the first to her body, his whole form shaking with rage at what they had seen, but Oogami had held him back. It was better that Murralsee didn't notice what they might have been searching Celestia's body for, and Dio's temper often interfered with his mind when it came to being subtle. They had to put all of their hope towards Celestia both having the key to Alter Ego's locker and not revealing it to the Mastermind, and Kirigiri wasn't going to risk that hope for anything.

Murralsee had not moved an inch, after having taken another life, which made it easy for Kirigiri to take the key and move back. The avatar of the Mastermind had retreated back to wherever it stayed when not needed, which left the survivors with a chance to recover Alter Ego and try to understand their next move. Sending Naegi to the hidden room behind the boy's toilets had been another move by Kirigiri to get both of them on the same level.

What they suspected before had been confirmed. The Mastermind had outside contacts, large amounts of resources, and had an immense sense of pride. They had received new information. The gender of the Mastermind and the nature of how they could have recruited followers, the way that Celes drooled with each word detailing the Mastermind's glory. They even knew that the Mastermind was not concerned at all with people on the outside.

Unlike the others, however, one part of Celestia's speech had taken Kirigiri off-guard. The key to all this was hidden in those words and she still couldn't figure out just what the Ultimate Gambler meant. The clock had struck midnight and Kirigiri was still chasing the same clue, perhaps contradicting advice on the necessity of avoiding impasses and focusing on discovering what you could discern.

*Power that overcomes life and death. Celestia believing that she would be 're-born' somehow. Those thoughts were all that Kirigiri needed to put her back where she started. Any other person saying this at any other time might have just been written off as delusional or lying, especially by herself, and given little else.*

It was the look in Celestia, no, Taeko's eyes that caught her attention. That look of complete and sincere belief that she would be delivered from death somehow, or come back again as if death was nothing, enraptured Kirigiri. It toyed with her and mocked her throughout the rest of the day. Nothing that she accomplished seemed to matter in the face of this insurmountable question.
"What did she mean by that?" Kirigiri asked herself. "Celestia was just being metaphorical, but the way she spoke...there has to be a solution."

It wasn't that the deaths were being faked. The victims showed every sign of human death and couldn't be mistaken for anything else and the 'blackened' had all suffered a cruel fate that had been delivered swiftly and directly without a chance of being swapped in or leaving them in a living condition. Executions designed to torment their Talents and their inability to escape rather than executions designed to leave a gap for escape.

Celestia wasn't the type to have been fooled by illusions either. Barring mental strain from the Mastermind knowing her true identity, and using that against her, it was unlikely that the Mastermind's word would have been taken without sufficient evidence. The possibility of Celestia merely trying to shatter morale existed as well, but Kirigiri just couldn't accept that explanation. Every instinct inside her was screaming that it wasn't something so simple.

At this rate, she'd be thinking about this for another two hours before finding the answer.

"I'm getting nowhere." Kirigiri said realising that she had truly hit a brick wall. "Celestia was probably just lying about the whole thing. A last-minute attempt to appeal to the Mastermind only to reveal too many secrets."

"The Ultimate Gambler spoke the truth."

That soft voice, almost soothing were it not for the powerful echo, was more than enough to make Kirigiri turn around. There was no chance of her allowing herself to show her back to the android that had mercilessly butchered Kuwata, Oowada, and now Celestia. The fact that its steel-chain whip was wrapped around its right forearm did nothing to ease her nerves, knowing how quickly it could unravel that chain for its use.

She had done her best to keep her composure, to contrast from Naegi and Asahina's horror and Oogami and Dio's fury, but having seen the way that Celestia's neck almost caved into itself had nearly been enough to make Kirigiri vomit. The way her eyes bulged from the shock of betrayal and the horror of the banality and lack of ceremony in her execution. It was a small mercy that Murralsee often moved the bodies away from them after a brief few seconds of witnessing the demise of the Blackened. Were Kirigiri the type to let herself be blinded by sentiment, she'd have said there was a tenderness to how the corpses were treated.

But she wasn't. There was a truth behind this and she was going to find it. The thing in front of her was simply the avatar of the one behind all this and she wasn't going to treat it any other way.

"How did you enter my room?" She asked despite knowing the answer. The ceiling tile in the corner of her bedroom, left to her bed, was just slightly out of place compared to the others.

"My Master had decided that I would need a method of entering the rooms of the students, without using the doors, if needed. This is one of them." Murralsee replied.

"Strange that I didn't notice this particular feature of my room." Kirigiri had searched every nook and cranny of the room, including the ceiling tiles, in search of secret passages and the like. She had found nothing and yet here Murralsee was, despite the locked door.

"It is activated from afar. You would not have noticed it until now, nor would you have been able to detect issues with the other ceiling tiles." Murralsee said. Its arms then stretched out mechanically, as
opposed to its usual fluidic movements. It caught her suspicions. "My Master's designs cannot be overcome. You would do well to submit."

"What did you mean by your words? 'The Ultimate Gambler spoke the truth.'" Kirigiri ignored the usual warning of the Mastermind's greatness. She had the feeling that this was not meant to be happening. "How can the Mastermind have control over life and death?"

"Your lives are at his mercy. At any moment of his choosing, he could kill every survivor remaining without even blinking." Murralsee spoke the words that were probably programmed into it since its creation. Likely the result of initial orders preventing it from giving the truth.

What was clear to Kirigiri was that Murralsee was hiding something. The Mastermind might have sent it as a warning, designed to torment the survivors after seeing one of their own as a Traitor, or even to tempt them to replace Celestia as his agent. Yet, what did the Mastermind have to gain from what Murralsee was doing? Kirigiri had just learnt that the Mastermind had a system that allowed entry into her room, a secret she'd have thought the Mastermind would have preferred to keep secret.

The tone of Murralsee was what caught her attention. Normally, it spoke in a single tone that never shifted a single bit and recited the glories of its 'master' as if it were holy script. This was nothing compared to the shifting language where it spoke earnestly one moment and then recited words as if the demonic machine itself was bored by it.

Kirigiri had a theory and decided to be straightforward about proving it.

"The Mastermind doesn't know that you're here, does he?" She asked.

"Our goals are aligned. To secure acknowledgement of his mastery." Murralsee said without actually answering. A few moments of silence and it spoke again. "He would not approve of this method. More time is meant to be spent on this phase before reaching the next. I judged that this initiative would produce superior results for all sides."

"All sides?" Kirigiri baited. She needed to get all the information she could out of this moment of independence by the Mastermind's minion.

"My Master attains dominance and you are able to preserve your existing numbers. When victory is impossible, it is better to surrender and live." Murralsee's tone carried something. An emotion that Kirigiri couldn't identify.

"I doubt the Mastermind feels the same way." Kirigiri replied. She let the pause hang over them.

"He would be...displeased. It is why he will not know of this." Murralsee said. Kirigiri couldn't restrain a gasp of shock as she realised the implications. An act of rebellion? The machine still spoke on. "The cameras for this room are on a loop for the time being. My fellow servant has agreed with my logic."

A fellow servant? Someone else was managing the surveillance equipment then. So did the Mastermind find it beneath him to watch over them? Or perhaps the system in use was too complex for a single person to run it, or even a mixture of the above-theories. Kirigiri had long-assumed that the Mastermind had an ego behind him, unwilling to even have Murralsee try to present itself as any more than a machine built to serve him, so it might even extend to the surveillance system.

Yet the system seemed to have its flaws. A machine capable of taking its own initiative? One that
seemed to go directly against the wishes of its master and/or creator? The field of artificial intelligence was advanced but no one had come close to creating an independently-minded system that could diverge from instructions given to it. Chihiro couldn't even manage that, even if he wanted to, from what Kirigiri had seen of his talents.

The closest thing that Kirigiri could think of to such a thing was Alter Ego and that still needed input and commands from the survivors when they interacted with-

A lightning bolt struck her mind. The tunnel vision that had encompassed her analysis of Celestia's final words was shattered into blinding light the second that Kirigiri's mind fell back towards Alter Ego. The eager-to-help AI that had enchanted the class and had been kidnapped by the Blackened to lure Ishimaru and Yamada into her plan to escape. The key to the truth that would lead the survivors to victory over this Mastermind.

Kept safe in a blind-spot where only the survivors could see it.

"There is nothing he does not know..." Kirigiri recited the words, cursing herself for not focusing on them in favour of the shock-value. Too much time was spent on deciphering a riddle and not enough on the disturbing fact staring her in the face. "He knows about it."

She didn't specify what she meant by 'it'. There was a chance that Murralsee could report this conversation back to the Mastermind, or could be forced to recite everything she said to its master. Better to have it reveal the secrets than herself.

"Yes. The Alter Ego AI will be terminated tomorrow evening as a disruptive element in place of a Motive or Trial." Murralsee said. Once again, Kirigiri couldn't control her expression enough to hide the shock. Tomorrow evening? There was barely enough time for the others to think of a plan. "That AI is the only thing that can challenge him. Without it, there is no hope."

"How do I know you aren't lying?" Kirigiri needed to know how much she could trust the machine. To let go of a secret like knowledge of Alter Ego's existence and the Mastermind's plan for it was an immense sacrifice.

"What motive would I have? The knowledge of the Alter Ego came from my Master, rather than our equipment's observations." Murralsee said.

There was no motive. At least not one that could balance out the information it surrendered. Alter Ego's room had been chosen as there was no way for the Mastermind to track them down beyond having Murralsee follow them. Kirigiri had people enter Alter Ego's room in small groups and as individuals as well, to avoid the cameras catching them all moving to the same place at the same time.

There was always the risk of the Mastermind sending a Murralsee to catch the group in a meeting with the AI. She spent so long keeping the untrustworthy like Togami-who had a streak of non-cooperation-and Fukawa who was practically tied to his hip out. There couldn't have been a way for Murralsee itself to have noticed Alter Ego unless Celestia told him, or something far more worrying.

*It appears that Togami might have been right about one thing about his game theory.* Kirigiri had assumed it was some kind of coping mechanism at first, then she assumed it was merely the way he was. Putting everything into a matter of cost-benefit analysis even when it was something as grave as murder. Now she could see that he had been on the Mastermind's wavelength somewhat.
The Mastermind's knowledge of Alter Ego, and Celestia's final words too fuelled by madness to be her normal falsehoods, meant one thing. One of the original fifteen students was the Mastermind.

Kirigiri already went down the list. She ruled out the blackened first, their deaths too brutal and bloody to have been faked, and their personalities too divergent from the cold yet dominating mystique of the Mastermind. Not to mention that they wouldn't have allowed themselves to have been shown to be so weak that a minion like Murralsee could kill them. This left twelve out of fifteen.

Next came the victims. The Mastermind wouldn't have allowed themselves to even give the illusion that he could be killed by one of the people he was meant to reign over as a God. This meant Maizono, Fujisaki, Ishimaru, and Yamada were out as well. Eight out of fifteen.

Kirigiri had to think outside of the box. It might have been that Celestia was assuming, or had been tricked into believing, that she was speaking to a male. Nothing could be ruled out, as Kirigiri tried to think of which surviving female could be the Mastermind. Yet, as she ran down the names and tried to tie them to the Mastermind's actions and potential motives, it was clear that it could have only been one of the boys.

Oogami and Asahina were nothing like the Mastermind in style or in spirit. They didn't have the darkness inside them to construct something so elaborate and cruelly-designed. Fukawa couldn't keep her cool in situations much less intense than arranging something on this grand a scale and Genocider Syo lacked the patience or the desire to drag things out for this long. The proof was against them.

Kirigiri could even vindicate herself. Someone like Togami, Fukawa, and even Hagakure, would have suspicions about her memory-loss, including as to what her Talent was, but she herself could trust that this lack of memory did not mean that she was the Mastermind. She suffered no black-outs during the Day Time and did not have any of the symptoms that came with sleep deprivation that would have to come with working in the Night Time to arrange certain variables.

That left the boys, and that was when Kirigiri had her two final suspects.

Naegi was definitely not the Mastermind. He was too much of an open-book to hide the urge to kill, too kind and willing to believe in the goodness of others, and lacked the pretensions to what could only be described as godhood that the Mastermind held. There was an intelligence to him, but also not enough for something like this. To hijack Hope's Peak like this...it just wasn't in him.

She didn't even need to think before lining out Hagakure as a potential Mastermind.

This left Byakuya Togami and Dio Brando. Both were intelligent, held high opinions of themselves, and had personality traits that matched the potential Mastermind. Togami was antagonistic and often acted as if everyone was barely worthy of looking at him, matching the Mastermind's attempt at breaking their spirits. Dio often acted friendly, especially towards Naegi, but his violence could not be discounted. The beating he gave Togami was only stopped by Oogami and Oowada, and the way his temper could be flared.

The truth was right there. All Kirigiri had to do was think just a bit harder and they'd finally have the Mastermind cornered-

"Kyouko Kirigiri. You are not in a mystery." Murralsee's voice flooded the room.
It was nothing compared to how it usually was. There was no calm denigration, nor apathetic command, but anger and fright. Anger at what it seemed to think was Kirigiri misinterpreting the situation and fright at what seemed to be the same thing. When it spoke her name, it did so with emotion familiar enough that an agonising flash of white reverberated in her skull and almost took her off her feet.

Why did it speak to her like that? Why was the Mastermind's servant so concerned with what she was doing?

"If you discover the identity of my Master, it will change nothing at best." Murralsee said, its eyes flashing red as always, only its voice now changed from a red void into a flowing river of something Kirigiri couldn't recognise. "If he knows of your suspicions, he will simply end this phase and demand submission and will attain it. Whether from your own will or from your corpses is for him to decide."

"Neither of my main suspects could defeat Oogami in single combat." Kirigiri replied. She knew there was more to it than that, the potential for traps or more Murralsees, but Oogami was their best shot. Genocider Syo could even be called upon, depending on whether Togami was the Mastermind or not. A wary eye was kept on Murralsee. "Your own presence will make things difficult."

"If my Master calls me into battle, it will because he does not wish to kill you himself. Do not presume that this is a detective chasing down a criminal." It was clear that Murralsee was trying to not be as it normally was. The first sentence was spoken as if it were a command hard-written into its data; the second a sincere warning to turn back from death.

Kirigiri tried to understand what it was that drove Murralsee to have these fears. Was this not the soulless abomination that cast them down to be executed if they failed to succeed as a 'blackened'? Only now she truly thought back to the executions. Other than Celestia, likely a reaction to her revealing more than she was meant to, had Murralsee truly participated in the executions? Had it been the one to throw the baseballs that shattered every bone in Kuwata's body? Had it been the one that held the chain that threw Oowada from his bike into the path of that truck, when he came so close the finish line?

Murralsee was responsible as any tool of the Mastermind, but it had not directly killed them. It had not been the one that ended their lives after their inability to use their Talents to-

Talent. The reason they had been accepted into Hope's Peak Academy. The topic of ice-breaking conversations and trying to engage in each other's interests. The thing that seemed so important until the Killing Game began and the survivors began to come closer to each other. Who really cared about whose Talent was what and what it meant? Certainly not Togami, who seemed to take more pride in his heritage and abilities than comparing Talents.

Only one person ever seemed fixated on Talent itself. Trying to suggest they use it to overcome the Mastermind and wanting to test the limitations of those Talents.

Dio Brando. The Ultimate Male Model. The Ultimate Master. Kirigiri restrained the common urge of discovering an answer to insult herself for missing out the now-obvious clues. Dio's fury at Togami had been enough that he was willing to kill him right there. For what? An insult to his name and status? That ease in slipping into the will to murder another. It was now clear that the way he tried to get close to everyone, showing his most charming features, must have been a way to allay suspicion. It was to bring himself into our trust, especially after what he did to Togami.
"This is not a mystery." Murralsee said again, cutting off Kirigiri's train of thought, as its voice grew more desperate. "I am bound by the commands of my Master. I am trying to save you and the rest of the students. Do not assume this has come easily."

"Having to go through loopholes like this..." Kirigiri let her words trail off. She needed to phrase her questions carefully, enough that they would be answered, especially with the potential orders and commands the android was placed under. "What is the Murralsee Machine?"

"A method of bringing together the participants of this Mutual Killing Game via the exchange of presents. It was a way to create bonds and for my Master to initiate friendships in case of complications." Murralsee replied. It sounded anxious, as if there was more it wanted to say, or warn about. Seconds passed and it spoke again. "Amongst other uses."

So he was not allowed to say. That itself said all she needed to hear; the Murralsee Machine was important.

Finally. She had the truth that she had been so desperately searching for. Dio Brando was the Mastermind behind this Mutual Killing Game, and now the survivors could work towards defeating him. All they needed was the proper plan to do so, which would require speaking with both Oogami and Alter Ego, the best fighter among the group and the best-equipped to handle outside factors such as the Murralsees and whatever other weapons Dio might have had installed into the school.

Kirigiri knew what this would mean. Alter Ego would have to be connected to the network and at a moment where Dio wouldn't find out and give the AI time to do what it could to gain control of the system. The risks were obvious. If there was someone or another Murralsee running the network, manually or with its own AI, then Alter Ego would be found sooner or later and they'd act to warn Dio and others under his command. The threat of other Murralsees had been what kept Oogami or Oowada from fighting the one before her.

*Murralsee probably isn't allowed to say how many of his kind are ready to fight.* Kirigiri had to be intelligent about her questions once again. *Maybe it's a question of phrasing.*

"The AI used within you. Is it as complex as Alter Ego?" Kirigiri asked. Dio had many talents but he never displayed an interest or a particular affinity in the field of programming before, among the many skills he enjoyed displaying. Maybe there was an accomplice helping him manage the Murralsees?

"My internal workings are not a matter of discussion. My Master's methods are enough for the number judged as needed in worst-case scenarios. More can be created in time if he ever needs more." Murralsee said with a clipped tone. It was clearly annoyed with her persistence. That was when the machine surprised her again; sighing with a cocktail of frustration and exhaustion that filled the room. "I have made a mistake coming here. You are determined to fight against my Master despite all of my warnings. Despite all he can do."

Those words carried something in them. Horror and shame seemed to fill the metallic armour and seep to the floor, and Kirigiri was left wondering again at how Dio was able to get his hands on an AI like this. One that could emote and act as a human when free of orders, closer to Alter Ego than most modern AI. Kirigiri assumed he stole it from Hope's Peak during his takeover but there had to be more to this. She wanted to find out more about Murralsee and just who it was.

But that was not a matter for tonight. All she had was suspicions and theories when it came to
Murralsee and she refused to allow another enticing but complex case get in the way of the bigger picture. It was already past midnight and she'd have to wake up early in the morning to try and meet with Alter Ego and then, if she was awake, Oogami. They needed to seize the initiative on this.

"What time do the students wake up?" She asked knowing she'd have to get up earlier.

"The earliest to rise awakens at 6:00 AM to plan out his day. My Master only cares for Night Time reports over students that left their rooms and if a murder has happened or is being planned." Murralsee said. Two sentences that seemed barely related instead gave her everything she needed.

Dio was likely the one that woke up so early and planned out what Motives to use and hearing about which one of them had been corrupted by his temptations and threats. Kirigiri would have to try and wake up just after Dio and work quietly. She could draft a letter for Oogami and slide it under her door, writing the message now during the camera-loop, and then move towards the public baths to Alter Ego so to move the laptop where she could connect the AI to the network.

It was difficult, but she could do it.

"Kirigiri," Murralsee said. It was a voice that recognised defeat but still held onto an empty hope. "If you declare your surrender, it will break the hope of the survivors. At the very least, it may throw them off enough that my Master will decide to move to the next phase. Alter Ego is a weapon. A weapon without a wielder is nothing. Accept defeat now or you will die."

"If we accept defeat, what makes you think that this will all end?" Kirigiri doubted that Dio would simply let the seven of them go.

Murralsee itself stood in place. Its whole form shook with the will to do something, or even say something to her, yet just couldn't overpower its own programming. Whatever it thought would keep them alive in slavery, it wasn't allowed to say.

"It can't say. Dio probably forbade talk of the outside world as well. There was nothing else for it. Kirigiri would just have to put her faith in what she had learned and hope for the best. Better to trust in a slim chance of victory and escape than to throw herself into the certainty of defeat, the cold embrace of surrendering herself and her future to someone like the Mastermind. Someone like who Dio truly was.

The sound of metal links clanging against one another filled her ears. "I could cut you down right here." Murralsee held up the forearm where the steel whip was firmly wrapped around. "My Master will not care and simply order me to create a fabrication. Yours and Alter Ego's demise will break their spirits."

"Then why don't you?" Kirigiri didn't know the reason, but she knew she was under no danger.

Murralsee stopped itself again. The arm, and the body itself, slowly moved forward as it shook harder than it had ever done before. Eyes flashed with honest anger, regret, and sadness, as it fought its own mental battle, before it nearly threw itself back away from her. The draconic face looked away from her out of shame.

"I cannot." It turned its face back towards her. "If battle comes, I will be bound by the laws of this school. Pray that Sakura Oogami and Genocider Syo are stronger than I am. Pray that my Master will treat this rebellion as a way to intimidate and not eliminate."
The android made its way back the way it came, slithering up the wall and opening the ceiling tile from where it then disappeared from sight after putting the tile back to where it was meant to be. Kirigiri was left alone in her room to contemplate both what she had discovered and what she had left to do. Just her and her thoughts.

*I shouldn't be too disturbed by the effects of sleep-deprivation.* Kirigiri knew that six hours of sleep wouldn't be too detrimental to her, especially if only for a day, and even more so when compared to the need to plan out the process of gathering evidence, removing Dio's control of the building, and making him act on his temper upon being revealed. *When the battle emerges, Oogami should confront Dio directly. The others need to distract Murralsee and prevent Dio from calling for help.*

The other survivors needed to know about Dio's identity. It'd be the only way that they could ensure that both Dio and whatever back-up plans he had could be dealt with.

The Murralsee Machine would be important. There was something inside it that Dio judged helpful, likely if there was ever a problem, and the survivors would need it just in case. Naegi was the only one who worked to gather them, but everyone had a supply of Coins, and it might be enough for them to buy presents in the hopes that one of them would be what they needed. At worst, at least one could be a weapon for the battle ahead.

They'd need to keep Dio distracted. If he saw everyone buying presents, or being evasive about Alter Ego, or even noticing that some of their actions seemed strange, he'd act immediately. For all his apparent lack of morality, Dio Brando was one of the sharpest minds that Kirigiri had ever met and wouldn't just wait for them to reveal their secret plan if he thought they knew his true identity. They had to keep his mind occupied and only one person could do that.

Naegi could hold Dio's attention. A story about buying another present from the Murralsee Machine, then slowly move Dio across the entire of the open parts of the school in conversation, while the others assembled their weapons and prepared to plan for his takedown. The Ultimate Lucky Student lacked any combat ability, and was the closest to Dio, so Kirigiri could at least trust that he'd put Dio at ease more than others.

To play it safe, she'd probably have to tell Naegi only to keep Dio's attention—he'd trust her enough for that—and then isolate and tell him the truth when Alter Ego was connected and when they had what they needed from the Murralsee Machine. Just after that would be when they would call Dio to an area where they could confront and disarm him quickly. Kirigiri preferred the dining room as a place where he would be at ease enough that they could act.

It was the best chance of success that they'd have. All Kirigiri had to do was wake-up at the right time, make the proper contacts, and ensure that everything went as designed. She had the truth now, the vital clues, and all that was needed was to apprehend the criminal. Oogami alone was strong enough to do that but it was better safe than sorry. Not to mention that the greater number, the quicker they'd have Dio captured as a hostage against the Murralsees.

Kirigiri could just taste the open air again when she heard something crash against the floor behind her. She immediately turned at the sound again, fearing that another Murralsee had emerged or something worse, when she found the noise having come from a small metallic object having been dropped to the floor. Luckily enough, as Kirigiri moved to pick it up, the object itself seemed perfectly intact. A simple clock that held an alarm mechanism on the top of it, along with a note stuck on the mechanism.

*The loop will end in five minutes. Work quickly.*
She set the alarm, write and hide her letter to Oogami, and wait for the loop to end before moving to change into her night-clothes, questions still running through her mind. What were the secrets behind Murralsee? What did Celestia mean by the Mastermind's power over life and death? How would she be able to convince the others of Dio's guilt without mentioning Murralsee's testimony?

All Kirigiri could do was trust that the students here finally had the advantage. They had the truth in hand and had Dio cornered, provided that they acted quickly and efficiently, and Kirigiri could only do so much in one day.

She could only hope that tomorrow would be the end of all this.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 3: Useless.

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How long would Dio have to lie in wait?

He should have had Alter Ego destroyed this morning. He could have commanded Murraalsee to say that the Ultimate Gambler had revealed the AI's presence to it and that it was a mockery of the rules set down by its master. A stroke of the steel-chain whip and that laptop would become nothing more than trash! The hope of the survivors would have been shattered!

Dio had waited too long. He wanted the betrayal to sink in. The image of what had been done to Taeko-the bitch who couldn't keep her mouth shut-burning into their minds.

Kyouko Kirigiri had been as dangerous as she ever was. Having Matsuda take away the memory of her Talent hadn't been enough to truly cripple her mind. Instead, she merely stumbled in confusion into skirmishes until deciding to take the initiative. Not that it was because of her own actions.

*Murraalsee.* The memory almost made Dio tense with anger. He felt like the high-flying businessman who came home to discover his wife rutting with the poolboy. When he triumphed, he would subject that servant once again to tortures almost incomprehensible to the human mind.

But not now. Not when he was at his most vulnerable state.

The survivors stood below what must have looked like the fallen king on his throne. All seven of them had played a part in the ambush, even Naegi who Dio had almost trusted with his deepest contemplations, only for it all to be a lure, and now they looked at the victory they had won. All of them thinking that they were safe now that they had slain Dio Brando, the Ultimate Master, where he stood.

Not enough to get closer. Dio's body did nothing. Kirigiri and the Ogre were still putting their ears to the steps and waiting for the sound of a heartbeat. Waiting for any sign of life from the Mastermind who had nearly taken some of them with him to the afterlife. If he made even the slightest change to his expression, they would stay at their current distance.

As if it was truly a concern for him. Dio could easily wipe them all out even now without the slightest of effort. It had only been a desire to play for the audience that kept him from unleashing his true power. That, and Murraalsee having been forced to fight in order to fend off Oogami, was why Dio was waiting upon his throne for one of them to just get closer.

To truly destroy hope, you needed it at its height. At its most vulnerable.

Who would it be? Never Kirigiri. She had been the one to tell the others to keep their distance and had likely been the one to draw up their battle-plan. Hagakure had been the coward throughout the
entire battle, even if that damn Zurion Ray-Gun's beam of light still stung at Dio's eyes, and Asahina was busy denying the truth of the world. That particular revelation had even caught Oogami off-guard enough that she now had a nice long scar along her chest, courtesy of Murralsee.

Togami? The inheritor's arrogance would make him the most likely to come over and twist the blade of Muramasa deeper into his gut, believing himself safe in the Berserker Armour, if it weren't for his pitiful state. The mere knowledge of his family's collapse sinking in was enough to make him reliant on Naegi's words. Fukawa was still in her Genocider Syo state, now out of scissors to throw at Dio, but was content with her continuing tries at bedding Togami.

Oogami had the warrior's caution but also their heart. She was the kind of fool who would be troubled by the thought of simply leaving an opponent's corpse to rot in the open air. That would be where she'd slip up. It would be the perfect moment. The sight of the Ultimate Fighter being ambushed by what she thought was a corpse, before she'd be shown just how insignificant she was in the face of Dio Brando's raw power!

Pain struck throughout his whole body. Dio had to use all his willpower to keep his eyes from widening. His heart! The pain of keeping it from beating was too much! His form ached and wailed to be able to let blood flow through his body, begging to feel the sweet beauty of air enter his lungs, and to at least avenge the humiliations of having to perfectly resemble a corpse.

Those who Dio would let live would have to commit to the worst humiliations after this. They would be made to sink to the levels of dogs to win their master's forgiveness. If he could hold out long-enough, at least.

"Kiritorigi, I have not felt a pulse for some time now." Ogre's voice echoed throughout the Trial Room, easily overpowering Naegi's soft tone and a brutalised Murralsee's mutterings. Dio could hear her moving from where she knelt. "We have successfully slain Dio Brando."

"For what? A world burnt to ash and ruin? The right to live in a building we've been killing each other trying to escape from?" Togami asked with his fury, bitterness, and heart-break driving each word. He scoffed. "Don't make me laugh."

"Togami-" Naegi was cut off.

"Regardless of whether Dio was speaking the truth, a matter we will discuss later, we can't be sure of his death yet." Kirigiri said. He could feel her eyes on him, wondering if she could spy the slight movements of soft breathes and the his heart beating again, free from pressure. "Give Naegi your armour, Togami. He'll be the one to check the corpse."

"M-Me?"

Oogami seemed uneasy about the idea, as she should. "Kiritorigi, I trust your judgement, but if Dio is alive-"

"The armour will protect him. Dio has scissors embedded in his legs, arms, and his upper chest. Not to mention a sword through his chest. Celestia's words aside, his body should be incapable of enough movement to act." Kirigiri said. How wrong she was.

"Naegi, you don't have to do this." Asahina said, half-way between hope and despair after all she had heard and seen. Dio would ensure that she'd be drowning in the latter when he was done.
"Yeah, come on Naegs. Hows about letting everyone's friendly neighbourhood serial killer check the corpse?" Syo offered before she made a confused noise. "Oh yeah. No scissors. Sorry, Makoto, you're on your own."

*So that's the game you're playing.* Dio realised what Kirigiri was doing. Once again, she was proving why she was the most dangerous of all the known quantities in his plan.

She was sending out the unknown element. The Ultimate Lucky Student, the wielder of a Talent that could bend the very forces of probability, was the perfect candidate to have test Taeko's words. To see if Dio truly was the Ultimate Master that he claimed to be.

'Even if he can defy life and death, maybe Naegi's luck could change things. Dio might hesitate and reveal himself, he and Naegi were close, right? Even if he does try to attack, Naegi has the armour. It's not too beaten.' Those words must have been flowing through Kirigiri's head. Comforting words to justify sending a canary into the coal mine to see if it was safe to work in the depths.

Naegi was probably assuming that she trusted him. Dio had been able to use that naivety to get close to him before and during the Killing Game—it might have been why Kirigiri had only told him just before their ambush—but now it worked in his favour. Now, he could finally remove the wild-card from his opponent's deck.

The Ultimate Detective was intelligent. Perhaps one of the most intelligent people that Dio had ever met. Yet that intelligence was nothing compared to the power of Dio Brando! That armour would do nothing! Her plan meant nothing! All of the efforts that the survivors had showed until now meant nothing!

Dio heard Naegi reluctantly accept the charge he had been given, the Ogre promising to be close by if something happened, and begin to walk up the stairs leading to the throne of Dio. The seat where even Murralsee had been forbidden to sit upon. Its glory had faded when caked in blood and death. That glory would only return with Dio's victory.

He could feel Naegi's sympathy drip down onto his body like water. The Ultimate Luckster was probably thinking back to fond talks and their co-operation in the Class Trials. The regret could be smelled even from where Dio was sitting, and there was the difference between the two of them. Dio was someone who lived without ever feeling regret for how he lived his life.

The Alter Ego mistake was merely a misstep, and one that would be easily corrected. It meant nothing to Dio's plans beyond the last work of a dead child.

The sounds of Hagakure babbling about what he found in the Murralsee Machine, Togami speaking with Syo and Asahina, Murralsee struggling to move in its battered armour, and even Oogami and Naegi softly exchanging words didn't matter. All that mattered was that Naegi was slowly getting closer to him.

"Kyouko...Get...him..." A dead man's voice echoed throughout the room. Dio heard a soft gasp from Kirigiri and heads were already turning towards Murralsee as metal crashed against the floor.

There was no time now. Murralsee had likely just removed its helmet and all would soon see its true face. Dio smiled regardless; luck had fallen to his side rather than Naegi's, as the latter had made the step that would seal his fate forever.

Dio's eyes shot open and looked Naegi dead in the eye. That look of shock and dismay was all the
Ultimate Master needed to know that this was his victory. Time slowed down to mini-seconds as Murralsee turned its head towards the throne where it tried to stop the inevitable. Hoping in the impossible as if belief would overcome certainty.

Even in death, Jin Kirigiri was a fool.

"Get away from him, Naegi!" Father and daughter cried out. It was useless.

Makoto Naegi had entered the range of Dio's Stand.

A purple-black fist, invisible to all but Dio, shot out from his body and struck Naegi right in the lower-centre of his chest. The Berserker Armour was a ceramic plate to a floor as it broke apart from the sheer force of the blow, the fist breaking through the metal and slamming against flesh and bone. Dio could feel the bones breaking against the knuckles of his Stand and smiled at Naegi's horror.

The wind rushed against Dio's face as Naegi shot back, flying too fast for Oogami to catch, and he took a moment to truly read those who had presumed that he would die so easily. Asahina only now starting to scream, Hagakure's sweating pale face, Togami's bewilderment, Oogami's shock, and even Syo breaking character at the sight before her. All five would have been enough to sate Dio's taste were it not for the look on both Kirigiris' faces.

Jin looked the same as he did when Dio blessed him with life after death. The thick red line around his neck was still covered up by the armour of Murralsee, yet the face was still the same as it was when Dio had the former headmaster locked into the guillotine. Fright and desperation before a final look of despair as he realised just what the future would hold for those he had tried so hard to protect.

Kyouko looked the same. She must have told herself that Naegi would be fine so many times when sending him to test Dio's corpse. Assumed that a piece of metal and the Ogre would be enough to ensure his safety. The logical side of her must have refused to accept Taeko's words literally and had doomed Naegi because of it. She let out a tiny gasp, frozen still from what she had just seen, when Naegi's body smashed against the wall and left him embedded into the stone.

The scissor blades that were embedded all over Dio's body shot out and clattered against the floor, the wounds now healing up even after his Stand had kept them from bleeding, from the sheer force of its power at work. Muramasa's scabbard remained within reach of Dio's arm as he extended it forward, took grasp, and yanked the blade out from where it had pierced his body. Togami had struck the sword deep, enough that it even broke through the throne. It was of no matter.

Oogami was quick on the attack. That brief moment where his vision was blinded from the shock of removing the blade was when she made to deliver a blow to the head. Right where Hagakure threw that damn crystal skull as well. It made sense to strike where Dio had suffered a concussion. All the strength in the world was nothing if you couldn't use it.

Sakura Oogami fought over four hundred matches and never lost once. Only one human had ever defeated her and that was a man whose prime was at Kamukura's level. There was no doubt as to who the strongest human alive was. No one could ever defeat her in a fair fight now.

But Dio did not fight fair! The strongest human might as well have been the strongest monkey compared to what he was now! Oogami's fist was like an axe swinging to take off his head in a single swing.

Her fist didn't touch his head. To the survivors, and to those around the world watching, Oogami
struck something else. This something else was strong enough that it seemed to meet her blow full-on despite seemingly just being thin-air. That would be incorrect to say, however. The better way to describe it would be that this something else blocked her fist.

The correct way would be to say that it broke her fist.

"Useless!" Dio roared as he stood tall and let the mighty Ogre stumble back. He turned his attention to his fallen servant. "Jin Kirigiri! How does it feel to know that this was all because of you? The man who wanted to preserve the last pieces of the old world's hope, only to find that he delivered them right to the doorstep of the Ultimate Master himself! To witness the destruction of all you believed in at the hands of I, Dio?"

Jin looked up at him with contempt. It seemed that the initial loyalty was a distant memory. "The same way it felt when you killed me."

"Killed you?" Kirigiri asked. The Ultimate Detective, normally so used to being the one to unveil the shocking truth, had never looked so taken aback before.

"Did you think that Taeko was lying when she spoke out of turn. I had such plans for her demise, even if she lacked what it was I sought." Dio felt another blast of air flow against his hair as his Stand caught Oogami's attempted kick. "Useless!" He spat as the Stand threw the Ultimate Fighter back and delivered its own blow.

Dio had designed the Murralsee's to reflect his Stand in most ways. Kazuichi's final product had been different in subtle ways, the steel-chain whips and the more slender design, but close enough that Dio could take comfort in knowing that the symbol of his power would be seen by all. His Stand itself was still unique as well, carrying a purple crown to symbolise Dio's future as ruler of all, and more muscular than the servants at his command.

It chuckled at Oogami's efforts. The Ultimate Fighter had been so proud of her combat abilities, capable of deploying multiple styles, and her undefeated record beyond her beloved. Now Dio would tear it all away from her in the last moments of her life. Just as Dio had it be the one that threw the finishing ball at Kuwata, the thing that threw Owada towards the truck, and the hand that broke Taeko's neck.

That was the way to truly destroy an opponent. Take everything about themselves that they believed certain and destroy it before their eyes. Render them aware of just how little they truly had when the battle ended and crush what little remained of them.

Sakura Oogami was nowhere near that point yet. Her nose was bleeding slightly and she still kept her right hand back, obviously aware that at least some of her knuckles had shattered, but she still stood tall. She was still fighting with purpose and focus that had remained unbroken. The will to fight on burned just as brightly as it always did in her heart!

Dousing that fire in the others would be a much easier task once she was dead.

"Sakura! Get away from him!" Asahina was screaming at the top of her lungs. It was almost sad how the sight of Dio's power had taken most of the attention away from Naegi's body, even Kirigiri only gave it sparing glances.

"No." Oogami replied, standing tall as she took on a different stance. It favoured the left side, away from where her forehead and right hand bled. "If I let myself retreat, he'll simply go after us all. Even
if he doesn't, there may be more Murralsee. Those that are not like the Headmaster."

"The dead are rising and Naegi and Ogre are getting beaten by a ghost..." Hagakure whispered, shaking in place. He yelped and grabbed at his head. Pathetic. How was it that he survived up to this point? "Gah, why didn't I tell the others about this?"

Dio had never doubted the Talents of most of his 'classmates', even those that could barely be called a Talent like Yamada's pornography, apart from Yasuhiro Hagakure's. The Ultimate Clairvoyant must have simply been an expert con-man.

The power to see through Fate only 30% of the time? It'd have made Dio laugh if it wasn't so pathetic. Mere guesswork presumed to be talent by those on the top who were easily impressed or wanting to find a reason that they were tricked.

*Now he simply lies to himself to bring a false hope. As if he was the denied prophet.* Dio thought to himself. Speaking of false prophets, the last Headmaster of Hope's Peak Academy had finally begun to move again.

"Dio...he has a power." Jin said, blood still dripping from his mouth. Each word was a struggle to get out. "A power he took from our experimental divisions."

"Oh? Is the last headmaster of Hope's Peak going to reveal its darkest secrets to the world?" Dio had the measure of his defiant servant. To the end, Jin would stay silent over the sins he committed to keep the students from falling into Despair.

He wouldn't mention the Arrow that made all of this possible. The Izuru Kamukura Project had been sinful enough without mentioning the second weapon that it provided for Dio's purposes. Without the power of his Stand, Dio would have been forced to rely on that damn science experiment for the darker aspects of his plan. Yet it was the power of his Stand that gave Dio the edge in all this.

It gave him the power to create an army of his own. It gave him the chance to fully bring Class 77 into despair. It erased any chance of his plans failing. Who would dare reveal the part they played in providing him with such a useful weapon?

Dio looked down on the others. Hagakure had reverted into an even deeper child-like state, just standing there gawping, even as one of the Murralsee Machine balls in his hand fell to the ground and rolled to the fraud's right. Trapped in awe of the power of Dio Brando, as befitted someone of such little intelligence and worth. At least Asahina was giving Naegi further attention, carefully seeing where his body was loosening from the wall itself, shuffling left to the centre where the Ultimate Lucky Student may fall.

Togami and Kirigiri were as off-guard as ever; trapped in calculating a way to somehow defeat what they could not even begin to comprehend. It was Oogami and Syo that kept Dio's attention. The former had to be destroyed utterly and one-sidedly if the world was to truly lose any hope of defeating Dio now. She kept herself on-guard and was just waiting for the right moment to strike, even though she surely must have known that she was doomed, and Syo merely watched with baited interest.

"Dio! I never knew you had telekinesis. If my White Knight hadn't been so charming, I might have fallen in love with you." Syo said, her face beaming, whilst her tongue slithered like a snake. Dio could only return with a smirk of his own.
"My offer still stands, Genocider." Dio said. He pointed Muramasa, still in his hand, and slowly waved it across the entire room to every single student. "All of you simply have to kneel before I, Dio, and your lives will be spared. You will be free of the anxiety of having to live in fear of one another. In time, when your loyalty is proven and I have fully taken this world, you will be granted freedom from this place and your memories returned. If you so wish."

That was enough to take everyone, barring Oogami, back. Before it must have sounded like the mad over-confidence of the defeated Mastermind when finally caught in their trap. Now it was clear that this was the magnanimity of the conqueror.

"W-What about what you said about why we're here?" Asahina barely got the words out. Her attention was so divided between her best friend and Naegi that there was barely room to think.

"It's pointless, Asahina," Jin was wearing the armour of Murralsee, designed to make even a little girl have the strength of a beast, and never looked so weak as he did now. "The plan was to keep you safe until this all ended. But it won't end."

"The world you knew has died. This is simply its funeral rites." Dio threw his arms out and smiled down on the survivors below, hiding behind the podiums of the Class Trial. His Stand kept an eye on Oogami who stood on the steps of the throne. "Embrace my new world and attain peace of mind."

Togami was the first to speak, eyes blazing with fury at the destruction of everything that made him important. "You can't seriously expect us to submit. After everything you've done to us?"

"Then die, Togami. Those are your choices." Dio replied, pointing Muramasa at the no-longer Ultimate. "Kneel and live under my rule, or die by my hand."

At those words, Naegi spat out what must have been a whole pool of blood. The red liquid splashed against the floor and caught everyone's attention, Togami included, as his form shifted from either being slowly dislodged from the wall or from shock itself. Dio had only limited himself enough that the blow wouldn't immediately kill Naegi, but that didn't mean that single blow hadn't nearly destroyed him.

The one who brought hope to the others was a pitiful sight. Blood pouring from his mouth and back, dripping onto the floor like water from a tap, whilst the Stand's fist had left an imprint where it had struck Naegi that was deep enough to make even Dio wonder if there was a similar indenture on the skin itself. To top it all off, for the first time since he was ten years old, Makoto Naegi had lost control of his bowels and stained the very trousers he wore.

Who could feel hope seeing that?

Naegi's show of suffering came at the right time. Dio could see the despair in the eyes of everyone around him. Makoto Naegi had been the one who always believed in them, always stood up to the aims of the Mastermind, and had been the one who had fought so hard to keep everyone from Despair. To see someone who had grown into what was almost a hero then get crushed by Dio's sheer power, it was enough to strike at anyone's heart.

Who else was there that could stand against Dio? Jin Kirigiri was the ultimate proof that no one, no matter how high they were, could escape servitude under him. The Headmaster of Hope's Peak was now nothing more than a collection of body parts and machinery kept together by the power of Dio's Stand. Being able to break its spell had been a shock, but an inevitable price of having been back in
the world of the living for so long and having to see the face of the daughter who hated him. That itself wasn't enough to blind Jin from the facts!

To fight Dio was to stand on the tide and command it to go back. To put a hand in fire and will it to not burn. To attempt to stop the flow of time itself.

*An impossible task for people like themselves, whatever Talent they may have.* Dio looked on as both Asahina and Hagakure's knees began to wobble. Perfect. All he needed was for one to bow and the others would follow suit.

That was when he heard a step being taken to his left. The Ultimate Fighter was slowly ascending the steps towards Dio's throne with a purpose and determination that defied everything happening around her. There was no hope to be found and she still moved as if anyone could truly stand up against Dio Brando. It was only fitting that her eyes were shut until turning to look at Asahina, so filled with anxiety and despair that she could barely speak.

Unable to stop her friend's suicide.

"I do not know how I will defeat you. Perhaps all my efforts will do is simply act as a stepping-stone for another to defeat you. But I do know one thing, Dio, and that is that I will never kneel before you." Oogami spoke those words as if she had some solution up her sleeve.

It was enough to make Dio grind his teeth.

He was not the man he was two years ago, before he gained peace of mind, but how could he react any differently to what he was seeing? How dare this woman-who barely looked any different from a man-look so serene and at peace with herself as if she had some hidden technique. As if there was any victory for her to take in this battle. She could only ever best Dio in unarmed combat; he didn't even need to use his Stand to cut her down.

Did she think any different? If so, then Dio would take pleasure in destroying that thought with the sole of his boots. The Ultimate Master's destiny would not end here!

Sakura Oogami moved with a speed that most could never keep up with. She was the wind itself, swift and invisible, but also carrying a force that could rip apart entire forests from their very roots. For Dio, it was as if she was standing by the steps one second, only to then appear just inches away from his face the next, aiming her left leg in a flying kick. Truly, she had been one of the few who stood at the peak of mankind, when it came to the possibilities of the body.

If only she was fighting a man, and not a God.

The Stand was just as physically-built as Oogami and even faster than she ever was. All it simply had to do was throw its left forearm again against the side of the Ogre's knee, the bone cracking from the force of the strike, and the world's supposedly strongest fighter was sent flying in a spin. Dio simply tilted his head and Oogami's body didn't even touch a single hair. She crashed against the steps on the opposite side of the throne and only just managed to land herself on her feet.

She could barely react when her throat was grasped by an hand that she could not see. The Stand drew her closer to Dio where its blows could do more harm and but just far away enough that she could never reach him unless he moved closer to her.

Now came the punishment.
"Very well then, Ogre. You will serve as an example to everyone in this room, and to everyone watching this across the world, what it is to defy me!" Dio spoke with a roar as the Stand threw Oogami up in the air, just enough for Dio to ready himself, as he slammed the tip of Muramasa's blade into the ground and readied his fists.

The way that she raised a fist in defence was worthy of respect. Someone truly ready to fight until the end. It was simply the curse of Fate that her opponent had the infinite power of their Stand, easily able to slam the hand away, and begin the attack. Dio and the Stand began to strike together. He was not going to let anyone think that Dio Brando was solely reliant on his Stand when it came to battle.

"Useless!" Dio aimed a right fist onto the left side of Oogami's ribs and felt his knuckles sear from the pain of striking iron, even as the bones themselves groaned from the force. The Stand itself struck at the right side of her upper rib-cage and the sound of bones breaking from the force only made Dio's grin larger. "Useless! Useless! Useless!"

He spoke those words with every blow that he and the Stand made. The two unleashed a flurry of punches that were simply impossible to block, each one strong enough to leave a bruise, and every one echoing throughout the room. Oogami could do nothing as her bones shattered, her flesh turned purple, and her teeth were sent flying out of her body. It was less a battle and more a long and drawn-out murder.

The survivors could do nothing. Asahina screamed. Hagakure retched what was left of his breakfast. Kirigiri merely watched with open fright. Togami was barking something at his pet killer. Syo had then moved to grab one of the scissors that fell from the stairs of the throne.

Dio had thought it was to deliver a mercy killing, when the blades were instead moving directly for the right side of his head. His Stand easily intercepted it with its fist, sending the blades flying, before going back to sending down the divine punishment.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Jin wept as he said those words. Dio could barely hear them, but the sound of defeat and despair might as well have been heaven's trumpets themselves.

Seconds that might as well have been hours passed. Dio called back his Stand and took a step back to see what had become of the Ultimate Fighter, or whatever you could call the standing slab of beaten meat before him. Her white hair had turned pink from the blood that sprayed all over it, the red liquid oozing from all over her body and coating both herself and the floor with it, and the fact that she could stand was nothing short of a miracle.

A miracle that no one appreciated.

"Sakura!" Asahina howled before crumbling to the ground. Her sobs cut through the air, for she could do nothing else.

"Th-This can't be real." Hagakure had already fallen to his knees.

Kyouko Kirigiri looked as if she was trying to find the words to say after what she saw. How much guilt was she feeling? 'If I had simply taken Celestia's words to heart, and knelt, Oogami would not be here right now.' Those must have been the thoughts haunting her. She was so sure that the truth itself would be enough to take down the Mastermind, when all of her efforts were doomed from the start.
Dio could even see Naegi, even in his state, trying to rip a hand from the wall and reach out to her. How like him to think of others when he himself was so close to death.

Just as he was about to declare victory, the sight before him took even Dio Brando, who had seen many bizarre sights, aback.

Oogami's whole body was wreathed in a white energy, normally summoned in her rage or shock, as she struggled to turn a broken neck towards her dear friend. What offended Dio the most was not that she was overcoming what should have been impossible odds to turn and give a friend hope. No. It was a simpler, and thus greater, sin

Sakura Oogami was smiling.

"Asahina, it's-

"Useless!" Dio ripped Muramasa from where it had been embedded and slashed at Oogami's neck. Where flesh and muscle might have once held back from a clean-cut, Dio was able to slice through half of the neck in a single cut. Oogami's final words were lost to the ages.

Asahina had no time to react as Dio then unleashed his Stand again to crash its fist against the chest of the Ultimate Fighter. Just as it was with Naegi, she was sent back at speeds that the human body was never meant to experience, and slammed against the wall above. Her right shoulder slammed against Naegi's chest, making him retch out another ocean of blood, but did not lodge against the wall. Both she and Naegi, dislodged from the force of her own impact, collapsed from the wall and slammed against the ground.

A cracking sound filled the room. Dio wondered what it might have been until he saw the blood pooling under where Naegi's face was. It was the result of a broken nose from the fall.

There was nothing else for it. Dio's tilted the upper half of his body back and gleefully laughed at what he had just done. All of humanity had just seen him slay the Ultimate Fighter without her laying a single blow on him. He, who had taken a blade through the chest, had miraculously healed from all his wounds by virtue of his power. Who could look at this and say that Dio Brando did not have heaven's favour? He looked down upon the horrified survivors, those who dared to try and kill him, and spoke to them.

"Do you see now? To battle against Dio is to battle against God! Throw away your hopes and dreams and submit to me. Look at Jin Kirigiri and see how even the dead obey my commands. Kyouko, you know that Taeko wasn't speaking metaphorically. Life and death are nothing to Dio Brando. I will be the one who guides humanity into the new world as its ruler. Kneel now and you will be free from the fears and anxieties that rule your lives. Live in the security of knowing your fate. The certainty of service under I, Dio. This is your final chance for that peace of mind. If you refuse, you will no longer know what it is to have a choice."

"Guys, I think we need to think about this." It was Hagakure to spoke first, without his usual mirth or even over-the-top cowardice. It was the solemn defeated tone of one who knew when hope was lost.

"No." Kirigiri said, trying to sound confident in herself and failing. She was a student who didn't study that was being called upon in class; she had to give an answer but obviously hadn't figured out one yet. Even pointing her finger at Dio, acting as if this was just another Class Trial, there was none of her strength on display. "I don't know how you killed Oogami, but if we do-"
To all but Dio and those he deemed worthy of Stands, it looked as if the scissors that rested by one of the throne's legs had been picked up and thrown at Kirigiri by thin air. The truth, of course, was that this was another display of his Stand's power. It threw the blades with enough force and precision that it managed to pierce through her side, sending her stumbling to the ground, without cutting through anything major.

Dio would have Kirigiri kneel out of her own free will. It didn't mean he didn't bask in Jin's horror.

"Kyouko!"

"Your treachery did this, Jin. I give you the mercy of life again and you spit in my face," Dio said. He gave Jin peace of mind and this was how he was repaid? That sight would mean nothing to the punishments he had in store for the disgraced teacher, but that would be for later. Right now, he needed to break the daughter first. "Kyouko, there is nothing for you to discover. I'll tell you how the Ultimate Fighter perished."

Dio pushed his hands through his hair, subtly rearranging it after its slight cuts from the earlier battle and the blasts of wind from Oogami's assault, and shot his eyes between each and every survivor. It was as if he was the vengeful king coming after the peasants who had dared challenge his divine right to rule. It was only fitting that both Kirigiri and Jin were crawling on their hands and knees towards the others, crowding around Oogami and Naegi.

Dio threw his hands out and let his Stand revel in the glory, mimicking his pose of slanting his upper body back to match his arms, all the while keeping his head up and looking directly at his future servants.

Where there was once blood and scars, there was now nothing but clean and perfect skin. It was as if the battle never happened.

"This is the power of God. This is the power that destroys and creates on the whims of I, Dio Brando!" Dio laughed as he then directed his gaze towards the cameras that were showing this all over the world. "This is my Stand. Holy Diver!"

Holy Diver howled at the sound of its name finally being said. The survivors did nothing but cower at the name of the natural force that had so utterly destroyed the person that was meant to be the strongest among them. The hope that they carried so dearly had been extinguished and replaced with despair. Despair at Oogami's death, despair at Naegi's beating, despair at Dio's power, and even despair at their fates.

The final round had ended in Dio's victory.

No one would stop him now.

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"Naegi..." Kirigiri trailed off. What could she say to someone who had such faith in her? "I'm sorry."

The scissors hurt. It hurt when the blades cut into her flesh. It hurt when they dug in further as she crawled over to where Naegi laid and where Oogami's bled out. It hurt when Syo yanked them out and Togami immediately started wrapping the wound while keeping Syo away from the blood. It
even hurt as the cloth touched her skin and the air seeped into the gap left by the wound.

It was still nothing compared to how she felt watching Naegi's prone body. It made sense that they didn't rush to pick him up or move him, especially when Asahina, one of-now the-physically strongest of them was busy with Oogami's corpse. Not to mention that it might have worsened his condition if they accidentally broke anything whilst moving him.

*Not to mention that it's our fault he's like this.* Kirigiri was so sure that Dio was at least wounded. It was impossible for him not to be, no normal person could have withstood that assault, had those metal blades in their body, and still moved the way Dio did.

Now Naegi was bleeding like an animal carcass at a butcher's because of her. A small part of her wondered if he was dead as well, all because she got it wrong.

Kirigiri resisted the urge to turn her head back towards where Dio Brando stood tall above her and her classmates. The man who had destroyed the world, taken away their memories, turned her father into his slave, and had now killed the Ultimate Fighter. To see him in perfect condition would have been too much. A stark reminder of the mistake she had made and what it had cost them.

She knew who she was now. Kyouko Kirigiri was the Ultimate Detective, a member of a line of truth-seekers that stayed in the shadows, and could discover the secret behind any mystery. If Dio was like any other criminal, Kirigiri would have used the discovery of his identity against him, and her plan would have worked perfectly. He had even showed all the signs of death.

Instead, he was not like any other criminal. He wielded a power that could deflect attacks, use enough strength to destroy Oogami entirely, and was able to bring back the dead. Dio was standing there as if nothing even had an effect on him. How could Kirigiri even hope to plan against that? How was it that anyone would be able to defeat him?

Her father had been right. She wasn't in a mystery. There, the criminal was bound by the fear of the law, of being caught, that kept them from simply trying to murder the detective even when knowing their identity. Celestia had been right. Dio could control life and death itself. He knew everything about them. If a man had such power, why on earth would he fear something so puny as the law itself, having destroyed it himself?

They had been right. More importantly, having rejected their words as propaganda and metaphors, Kirigiri had been wrong.

*And he paid the price for it.* Kirigiri barely had the strength to stand up again. She had to. Someone had to be the one to lead the group after what happened. The detective bit her lip in frustration, mere minutes had passed and they had went from tired victors to nothing more than toys for Dio. *How could I have been such a fool?*

There was a strange cosmic sense in Naegi's condition. The most optimistic and trusting member of the group was lying on the ground with broken armour, wheezing in pain, whilst the group itself was falling into despair after everything they had seen and heard. Kirigiri had planned on having herself and Naegi rally the group, having assumed that Dio had been lying about at least the state of the world itself, but that had turned to nothing. How could she think to win them over now?

The Togami Group, everything that Togami spent his life working to inherit and achieve, was nothing. Hagakure and Asahina had been frightened by the thought of living in the apocalypse and now they had seen Oogami perish at Dio's hands. Asahina had always been warm and welcoming,
but the sight of her best friend's corpse had smothered what hope was there. Syo herself was subdued compared to her normal self, and Kirigiri doubted that Fukawa would bring any optimism to the group.

Right now, everyone was concerned with Naegi and Oogami. Asahina was even trying to find some sign that Oogami had enjoyed the same kind of luck that Naegi did, that if someone so small and scrawny could survive an attack from 'Holy Diver' then maybe the Ultimate Fighter had a chance.

She could try but Kirigiri could tell the signs of death from afar—even smell it—and Sakura Oogami had long since passed from this world.

Not that Kirigiri was carrying herself with any greater dignity. Blood seeped from her body and formed a red trail leading towards where Makoto Naegi was face-down in a pool of his own blood, although it was rapidly mixing in with Oogami's, and her pace was closer to a crawl than a walk. The only thing that kept her moving was the sound of small and slow breathes, a sign that he was at least fighting for his life.

It was only when she fell to her knees, right next to him, that she heard him say something. It was quiet, closer to a mouse's level of volume than a human's, but Kirigiri heard it regardless.

"Togami, he's trying to say something." Kirigiri said. It sounded as if Naegi couldn't move himself from where he laid. "I don't think he wants to be facing his own blood."

"Someone turn him around, try to keep the blood from pooling out of his body." Togami ordered, even as his voice lost that cutting-edge that lent it such authority. He only took charge here as there was no one else left instead of a natural self-confidence that easily crossed the line into arrogance.

Both he and Hagakure moved to delicately remove the remnants of the Berserker Armour, the back of it nearly cracked in half with a large scar, from Naegi's body. They then grabbed the sides of Naegi's hoodie, stained with blood like the rest of his clothing, and tried their best to gently move him without having whatever injuries he'd have hitting the floor. Having Naegi face-up would give them all a better chance at ascertaining just how badly he'd been hurt by Dio's 'Stand'.

That was the plan, at least. It was when Naegi screamed in pain that Hagakure almost dropped him, only Togami's glare keeping him from doing so, as they shifted his position and laid him onto the ground. It was an involuntary response, driven by instinct, as tears ran down the Luckster's face. He likely knew that they were right to move him, but it didn't mean that he wasn't in awful pain.

Kirigiri had to swallow her feelings about this.

"What are you doing? Stop hurting him!" Asahina snapped, despondency turning to fury at the sound of Naegi's cries.

"Asahina, any movement is going to hurt him," Kirigiri said. She had to be cold or else they'd simply be dragging it out for him, having gone from loud shrieks of pain to quiet whimpers. The Ultimate Detective put a hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eye. "We're going to feel over your body. Try to say if it hurts."

How did Naegi have the strength to smile? "I trust you, Kirigi-AH!" His pupils constricted and a wail came out from him again as Kirigiri touched his lower right ribs as gently as she could, whilst also trying to find out the damage, moving onto the lower left ribs before moving upwards.
His cries of agony only became quieter when his lungs could no longer withstand the exertion and it became quiet hisses and gritted teeth. This wasn't good. Holy Diver's strike had been enough to completely shatter the entirety of Naegi's lower rib-cage. She could feel the cracks with her touch and the moan of pain whenever he even slightly moved them. A look to Togami was all he needed to adjust his hold so that she could check the rest of his body for signs of injury.

It was just their luck that simply being moved up was enough to make Naegi unleash a dry screech, almost making Togami let go entirely, before he regained his composure and adjusted his grip again.

"I felt something." Togami said, shaking his head. Kirigiri kept herself from swearing. It wasn't just Naegi's ribs that were hurt but his lower spine as well from the way he crashed into the wall itself, the armour probably saving his spine from breaking entirely.

"Naegi's injuries can be healed." Dio's voice slithered into the ears of the group. "The Ultimate Nurse can be summoned. It's not as if he'll bleed out."

"He's telling the truth. Tsumiki Mikan is one of his most loyal servants." Kirigiri's father said, all eyes turning to him. The man was a pitiful sight, dragging himself and the armour he wore forward, trying his best to reach them.

The group themselves had been arranged so that they were a wall. A wall that protected Naegi and Oogami's corpse from Dio, his glance itself might as well have been poison, after everything they learnt about him and what he had done. Asahina herself, holding onto the half-decapitated corpse of the Ultimate Fighter, seemed barely able to keep herself from charging Dio and joining her friend in the afterlife.

Not that it mattered. If Dio was the master of life and death, bringing back more undead servants would take little true effort.

That didn't mean Kirigiri didn't ponder his words. Maybe he was right. Maybe there was still a chance of fixing Naegi quickly. *No. Don't forget about internal bleeding.*

It was a possibility that couldn't be ruled out. The extent of his injuries, and the way he got them, meant that the odds weren't in his favour. They'd have to check from for bruising, even as the process of moving his shirt meant accepting more sounds of pain from Naegi and the scent of his soiled trousers. A cruel humiliation on top of everything else, despite Kirigiri and Togami doing their best to ignore the patch on his trousers.

As they adjusted his hoodie to get a better look at his back, that was when Kirigiri noticed that Naegi's left side had apparently landed on something after falling from the wall. The front of the armour had long since shattered and thus have no protection. His bad-luck in action.

Whatever he fell on, Kirigiri finally noticing the shards where Naegi had been laying, it had likely been one of the presents from the Murralsee Machine, still hidden inside its ball at the time of contact. She feared that it might have entered his body fully, if her body-check hadn't found it yet.

"Guys...Dio's offer...you can't..." Naegi tried to speak but each word took all his might and will to say. Fighting through the pain and exhaustion must have been tiring for him. He even took Hagakure by the arm and tried to stand himself up, before Kirigiri or Togami could stop him.

It was the pain of moving his spine and lower ribs that forced Naegi down with a cry.
"Kyouko, forgive me." Kirigiri turned her head to find her father almost bowing, although she didn't know how much was from regret and how much from the weight of the Murralsee armour on top of his own injuries. "I don't know how much you remember. Perhaps you will remember it all and will rescind it, but please forgive me. For everything. For not being what you needed."

"Why are you saying this?" She asked despite knowing the reason.

"Dio has the power to give and take away life." He replied. "There are other Murralsees. He killed us, had his followers create these mechanical suits, and then merged our bodies with them before bringing us back. It's how he's able to control us all."

The thought was enough to send bile up her throat, forcibly swallowed down, as she thought of how many people had been turned into his slaves.

Asahina spoke the question on everyone's minds. "How could he-"

"Because he can." Her father said. He turned to all of them with defeated eyes. "If we surrender now, he will torture me as an example, but me alone. If that's the price to pay for your lives, and the lives of those who I was meant to protect, it's worth paying."

"No...we can't...lose-" Naegi began to cough, or rather retch, up goblets of blood from his mouth. He still fought on to finish his sentence. "Hope."

Hope. How was it that he still had it even now? To look at where Dio stood, and where they knelt, and believe that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

"What is even left to fight for, Naegi? The Togami Group has been destroyed." Togami said, his voice void of that pride that had so defined him.

"The entire world's been destroyed." Hagakure added.

"Sakura is dead." Asahina said. Her voice was different from the others, an undertone of desperation was there. As if submitting would give them the island of stability they needed so much. "If we can bring her back-"

"As what? A servant of Dio? My father had orders he couldn't disobey." Kirigiri said. It was only last night that he seemed to find the strength to defy Dio via a loop-hole, and even then he still followed the orders given to him.

"Those he brings back from the dead are changed. He calls it 'peace of mind', but it is more being in a state of complete loyalty to him. I was only able to break free because of what he was doing to you. A part of me hoped that I could somehow stop it." Her father admitted. It fell to Kirigiri to sum up the conclusion.

"So even if Oogami returned, we can't be sure that she'll be the same person that she was before Dio..." Kirigiri let her words trail off. It was unnecessary to state the obvious right now.

Asahina wept over the corpse of her friend yet again. Somehow, Oogami had kept her smile even after Dio cleaved off most of her neck and threw the body across the room. It might have rallied their spirits once.

Not when they were facing Dio now.
No. There has to be a weakness to this. There has to be a solution. Kirigiri must have spent her life searching for truth. She didn't know why, perhaps that was an answer only her past held, but that same thirst and drive was all she had left. It was all she could use to keep them from submission, especially with Naegi barely capable of speaking, let alone moving.

Life and death. The two basic facts of existence that Dio claimed mastery over. The power that her father claimed had brought him back to life. What she assumed was a metaphor or verbal trick was instead the plain and honest truth. Dio could even bring himself back to life. So why was it that her mind was rebelling against the thought? Not against him having supernatural powers—that much could not be denied—but about his power.

He had shown most of the signs of death, even lacking a heartbeat for an almost inhuman length of time, and even Hagakure could smell it on him.

But no. All of that could be faked. If anyone would have had the will to throw away their pride and go through extreme pains to score victory, it would have been Dio Brando. The very fact that he had some invisible guardian could have explained how he kept free of a heartbeat. It simply grabbed the organ itself and kept it from beating, so that not even Oogami could hear it with her ear on the steps.

Illogical, bizarre even, but not impossible.

Dio, even now, looked the part of a king. His hair was messy compared to its usual look and his clothes had been darkened by the blood that had once poured from his body, but it did nothing to detract from the regal dark purple that he wore. Only someone with his sheer lack of self-doubt could have somehow acquired a grace and confidence despite having come so close to death.

Wherever his hands touched, during his strange act of self-worship, it was as if all the damage and pain that his enemies had struck against him turned to nothing. Did coming back from the dead even mean that his injuries were healed as well. The scent of death that plagued him before had long since been gone. The blade of Muramasa and of Genocider Syo's scissors might as well have struck air for all the effect it had on him.

Kirigiri's eyes widened. It hit her. The truth behind Dio's power. Power of life and death? No, more like a consequence of his true power.

Effect. Dio can reverse effect? Kirigiri didn't need to say it out loud. Perhaps Dio could only alter effect as it related to his own body, or he could change effect itself. It changed little.

He'd still been toying with them all this time. Letting them believe that there was a slight chance of victory against him when they launched their trap, instead of quickly squashing that hope without even trying. Yet why would he? Better to let them try their hardest before revealing the terrible truth.

Dio could negate any effect at least as far as it affected him. His Stand was faster than speeding bullets and could punch through steel the way it dealt with Oogami, and all this while it was invisible to them. Kirigiri had found the truth and despaired.

We can't win.

Nothing they could do would have an effect. Or rather, an effect that Dio could not simply erase. It was as if they were playing chess with only the king piece while he had half the board filled with queens. A battle that could not be won.
The leadership of the group had fallen to Kirigiri ever since this morning, Togami having accepted her authority in exchange for defeating Dio once and for all, and it remained with her still. Togami wouldn't fight her. She knew that his confidence had been destroyed. All his defiance was merely a way of denying Dio total satisfaction.

Who among them wasn't in despair? Her father must have seen the world burn before being made a servant to the man that killed him, and knew first-hand that they couldn't fight, with Kirigiri accepting the same conclusion. Whatever defiance was in Asahina had long since died with Oogami and Hagakure didn't have it in him to fight.

Of them all, only Naegi seemed to protest their submission. She could hear him mewling, as the blood was only now slowing in oozing from his wounds, on how they couldn't lose hope now. Of course it would be him that would fight until the end. Her partner probably thought that there was some way for them to escape all of this, despite him fighting for his life from a single blow.

If he hated her for this, that was fine. She'd almost welcome it. So long as she could save their lives.

"How would we have to bow?" Kirigiri asked, breaking the silence. The smile on Dio's face was that of the devil himself.

"Dogeza." He replied, a mad glee in his eyes. Of course it was going to be the lowest and humblest of all bows. "Before this, I might have been willing to spare you some pride, but you forced me to reveal my Holy Diver. If you wish to live a life of hope and peace, the price is every last scrap of your dignity."

Kirigiri almost pitied that. It only made sense that Dio was going to be the type of person who saw pride as strength. It didn't matter if you had to discard for a second, so long as you shoved your opponent's face into the dirt and grime for all to see. That revenge would somehow restore what you once lost.

It didn't matter to Kirigiri. She'd play his game and do as he wanted. Pride was nothing if she could at least save her classmates, when it was clear that Dio could not be stopped by any of them.

She'd simply have to hope that the truth would guide someone else to victory.

Thus the Ultimate Detective walked in front of the group and fell to her knees, forehead touching the ground and her hands placed on the space between her head and her knees. At the very least, Dio hadn't commanded her to give some false speech begging that they, the undeserving, could be granted mercy under his service. No. Dio seemed to prefer laughing at his victory.

"And so ends the old world." Dio declared from atop his high throne. "Charisma. Stand Power. Fate. The three battering rams with which the foundations of the old have been toppled and the three pillars which my world will built upon. Hope. Despair. Both are nothing to the power of I, Dio. I stand on top of both. I stand as the Ultimate Master of all. Humanity, prepare for this to be your new eternity!"

There was nothing they could do. Kirigiri heard the sounds of shuffling behind her, the others likely deciding to join Kirigiri in her act of surrender. The detective knew better than to assume that Naegi would be spared the humiliation despite his injuries, or whatever relationship he might have had with Dio, and prayed that the others could arrange him in a way that would cut short any further pain.
It sounded like Asahina and Togami were the ones to move in, Kirigiri unable to see from her kneeling position, when she heard him speak.

"No..." Naegi murmured. His word was followed by the sound of him grabbing onto to something.

"Naegi-" Asahina was cut off as the Luckster seemed to latch onto her arm again.

"You idiot," Togami hissed, trying to keep the concern out of his voice. "You're only going to stretch out your-"

Whatever happened, it made both the Ultimate Swimmer and the Ultimate Progeny gasp.

Not even a second later, Kirigiri heard Hagakure and her father join them with their own shock, Genocider Syo even hummed in confusion. What was happening? Kirigiri risked Dio's anger and raised her head to turn and see what it was that Naegi was doing.

*How? He was barely able to move before.* Kirigiri herself couldn't contain her amazement.

Naegi was struggling. Each and every slight movement was making him tighten his jaw and his legs shook from the weight of his own body. Blood still dripped down from his mouth and body, the imprint left by Holy Diver still showing, and there were tears running down his face from the pain of moving.

Despite that, despite everything, Naegi was standing up and looking Dio straight in the eye. Kirigiri turned to find a look of astounded rage on the face of the Ultimate Master, offended that his assault hadn't crippled his victim the way it was meant to. This was not how things were meant to go.

Naegi tumbled forward, almost tripping in place, but caught himself. The worst that happened was that he wrapped a hand around his waist and had to take long deep breaths, as Togami and Asahina stood behind him in case he was truly about to fall. It was almost impossible to hear anything over his wheezes, but Kirigiri just barely heard the sound of something clanging against the floor as it fell out of Naegi's shirt.

There was no time to think about the small golden arrow-head, however, when Naegi had somehow found his wind again.

No one could look at him and objectively believe that he could win a fight with Dio. Putting aside every physical advantage in a fair fight, putting aside Holy Diver's power, and putting aside Naegi's injuries, it was a fool's hope. There was no way that Makoto Naegi could ever defeat Dio Brando in a serious fight.

Yet, why did it feel as if there was a new energy to Naegi? Why was it that Kirigiri felt the urge to throw herself off her knees and stand tall against Dio? Why did she feel this new defiance?

Why was hope filling her heart once again?

"No. You got that wrong!" He cried out, pointing a finger right at Dio's face.
Stand Stats

Holy Diver
User: Dio Brando

Stats
Destructive Power A
Speed A
Range C
Durability A
Precision B
Developmental Potential B

Abilities
User can nullify effect on self. Only activates via physical contact by the hands of user or Holy Diver.

Resurrection of the dead as servants. Appearance and name must be known to the user. Strength and willingness to obey relative to knowledge of the resurrected, however- Intrusion detected.

Activating Hope's Peak Network Security Measures.

Implementing virus-tracking measures.

Virus located.

Begin anti-virus measures on 'Alter-Ego'? Y/N?

Chapter End Notes

Yep, the fight so epic that I had to split it into two chapters. The second half might be a while, real life schoolwork is starting to pile up and needs doing, along with the fact that a lot is going to happen with Class 78’s fightback, but I won’t forget about this fic. I’ve done too much to not commit now.

This and the next chapter will likely be the most linear of the chapters here, but don’t expect that to continue. It's mostly because this chapter ballooned into something much larger than I ever expected it to than a change in writing style.

Don’t forget to tell me what you thought of the chapter. Your feedback gives me strength.
Livin' On A Prayer

Chapter Notes

Can't believe it but I'm actually making this a three-parter, of all things. Yep. The battle between Dio and Class 78 really can't be contained, can it? Actually, this might be for the best as five's a good number to end the Danganronpa 1 side of things. Let me know what you think in the comments? Liked it? Didn't like it? Any feedback is always appreciated.

Chapter 4: Livin' On A Prayer

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Makoto Naegi knew that he didn't look like a hero.

What kind of hero would be barely standing, shirt caked in blood and sweat, from a single blow? What kind of hero would have simply laid there in pain while others were beaten like a piece of meat at a butcher's? What kind of hero thought they could actually stand tall whilst urine still coated their lower half?

Naegi looked like the final victim whose pitiful last stand was meant to inspire the hero's second wind. To rise above their injuries, and even death, to fight for justice and good. Someone like Oogami should have been in his place, instead of being dead on the floor while Naegi lived.

So why he was doing this? Why was he so blatantly challenging someone who could kill him in an instant? Why was it that he thought himself worthy?

But that was it. This wasn’t a question of worth. This was a question of who else. Who else was there left to stand-up to Dio Brando? Everyone else out of the survivors was being drowned in despair, dragged deeper and deeper by a cruel mastermind, and had given up in the face of his unrelenting power.

Maybe it was easier for them to just admit defeat and pray that Dio would be merciful. Yet even Naegi, your average everyday student with terrible luck, realised now that mercy was a concept unknown to Dio. The closest thing would be slavery in gilded chains. They’d be trapped in the Academy like birds in a golden cage, weighed down by the knowledge that Dio had conquered them utterly.

Naegi did not think less of the others for wanting to surrender. After all they had learnt, what they had been forced to witness first-hand, who wouldn't want to surrender to the darkness? Saying it'd be better to die free than live a slave was easy talk when you didn't have to truly make that decision.

Only they couldn't! Not after everything that Dio had done. Not after all the hopes and dreams that the living and dead had confessed inside these walls. Not after having put it all on the line each and
that was why naegi refused to let himself simply lay there and cry out in pain while kirigiri humiliated herself for his sake.

so despite the pain of moving broken bones and bleeding wounds, the tears in his eyes, and the state of his clothes and body, naegi stood up and looked dio in the eye and said the words he knew weren't meant to be said.

"naegi," dio's voice was as smooth as ever, yet the poison in them was no longer hidden. "do you truly believe that you can succeed where sakura oogami failed? do you truly think that you can defeat me? we've known each other too long for you to truly be that stupid."

"stupid. i'm sure that's what you think of all this." naegi said. the strain of keeping himself steady kept back only by the fact that if he fell, so would everyone else. he moved forward enough that he grabbed onto the podium for leverage.

"how could i not? holy diver made quick work of the ultimate fighter and it took a single blow from it to nearly kill you." dio waved his hand towards naegi, a king dismissing a subject. "i, dio, have won. accepting the inevitable will bring you peace, naegi."

"but not hope." naegi narrowed his eyes and pointed again at dio. "that's what this is all about. you saw hope's peak and wanted it to become nothing more than a ladder for your way to the top. the institutions, its people, the faith people put in it. maybe it was flawed, but you didn't care. the only thing the ideals of it were to you was a rival. something to discredit and destroy so that people only had you to turn to."

"and what of it?" dio asked. "i am offering the people a path towards peace of mind. to live in a world free of uncertainty and darkness."

"you got that wrong!" naegi snapped. "you're offering people a world where they can only live in uncertainty. to put their faith in the good-will of the man who destroyed their lives! to live in eternal slavery and despair."

"tch, makoto naegi. you speak like someone who has only ever known the rewards of life and none of its burdens. the world you describe is no different from the old world." dio finally moved off his throne for his oratory. "hope is what we call it when we are at peace with ourselves. fate is the destiny of those who work within that pre-determined harmony. hope's peak wished to cultivate ultimates so that their talents would grow and pushing them to achieve their destiny. i, dio, am doing the same. i am striving to achieve the fate of the ultimate master. to destroy the flawed old ways and rule over this world, guiding humanity to its fate.

"that is hope! the security of knowing that one is acting according to one's fate. to be free of the doubts and flaws that prevent them from reaching such. to make it so that god is in his heaven and all is right with the world."

that's what dio thinks is hope? naegi knew that dio was a believer in the concept of destiny. the sort of person who believed that there was something innate in someone that defined their very being. but to believe it this strongly?

dio certainly believed in fate, but he seemed so sure of his own fate. that the title 'ultimate male model' was merely something he tricked others into believing described him instead of the ultimate
Master. One who would rule over all Talents and all peoples as if they sat on a throne in the skies instead of here on Earth.

That wasn't Hope, at least not a hope that could belong to anyone other than Dio himself. This was simply a way to beautify subjugating an entire species. Of murdering millions. Of murdering the innocent.

"No. Dio, that's not Hope." Naegi gritted his teeth. The pain in his ribs was nothing compared to the fire in his gut, almost as if the words inside him were somehow both soothing and driving him. "Hope doesn't come from Fate, or a God, but from people! People who want to accomplish their dreams through their own efforts. People who want to create rather than destroy. All you're doing is twisting and corrupting. How is beating someone to death with your own hands meant to bring Hope?"

Naegi turned back to his classmates. Asahina had moved back to holding Oogami's body, Togami and Fukawa—who had apparently changed back from Syo—were standing close and looked back at Naegi with confused eyes, whilst Hagakure hid behind the two of them. The Ultimate Clairvoyant was even holding his left ankle for some reason, muttering over something Naegi couldn't hear, but there were two people who caught his attention.

Kyouko Kirigiri and Jin Kirigiri. What Dio did to the previous Headmaster was almost too cruel to imagine. Killing someone who had tried to protect him from the end of the world, only to bring them back as a slave and force them to enforce this Mutual Killing Game, and breaking their spirit. The knife to Kirigiri's gut had been too cruel to imagine. A bully shoving their victim's face in the dirt just because they could.

Yet there was something different in their eyes. Kirigiri herself had knelt in submission after losing hope, despondency in every movement, but now there was something new within her. It was the same with her father as well. Their eyes, once lost in a haze of despair, were still dyed in torment but there was still a spark of something in them that convinced Naegi to stand firm right here and now. Anything to strengthen those flickers of Hope.

"I know it seems impossible. I know Dio looks like he's insurmountable." Naegi let his gaze linger at Oogami's corpse. "I know he could take everything from us."

"Not really selling us on why we should fight, Naegs." Hagakure muttered. Asahina kept her hold on Oogami's body and both Kirigiris kept a sharp eye on him. Togami and Fukawa were busy with some of their injuries, the former's hand looking badly cut whilst the latter was trying to not faint at the blood on her lower left leg.

Just how many injuries had they piled up between them, while Dio sat there without a scratch?

"But we can't lose hope," Naegi said. "Dio wants us to give up everything, our dreams, our souls, our futures, and give it all to him. He wants everyone in the world to witness him crushing the last bits of resistance under his shoes. If we bow to him, it's not just going to be us who can't ever get back up."

"What are we meant to do then?" Kirigiri asked. "Dio's Holy Diver protects him from harm and can allow him to recover from any injuries we deal to him. Exactly how do you plan on countering that?"

"I don't know."
"That's not a satisfactory answer."

"Kirisu, do you really think that Dio will give us our friends back? Our real friends?" Naegi asked. "That they won't simply be his slaves?"

"Our freewill had been robbed of us when we were brought back. The same will probably be true for the others." The old Headmaster said.

"No. He can't...Sakura shouldn't be-" Asahina turned her head, eyes blazing with fire. "Dio! If-if you bring them back, they'll be themselves, right? Sakura will be Sakura again?"

Dio toyed with the pommel of the Muramasa blade. "Who knows? Jin was fond of blaming others for his own failings in the past, maybe he's doing so now. I, Dio, don't know what the afterlife entails. Maybe those I return to life are simply grateful for my kindness."

"Forcing people like Kirisu's Dad to hold this Mutual Killing Game is kindness?" Naegi asked.

"That doesn't vindicate us refusing to obey Dio. In fact, he can simply kill us and turn us into his slaves whenever he likes." Kirisu pointed out. There wasn't that usual confidence she had when stating the facts, a clear sign that Naegi was getting to her.

"He can do that even if we submit." Naegi replied. The others didn't seem so sure.

Why would they? Fighting against Dio had only proved to be the death of Oogami and almost Naegi himself. The outside world was now so dangerous and cruel that even a prison like Hope's Peak Academy must have seemed warm and hospitable. They would never need to fear hunger or thirst as others would. All the comforts of life before The Tragedy were free to them. If it only cost them their dignity, then why not?

But that was wrong! The others were being ruled by their despair. The despair of seemingly insurmountable odds was now driving them towards a decision that would kill them in all but name. Dio was not offering them safety, however much he insisted otherwise.

All he could offer was the security of those who lived under tyrants. The law would be kept to unless you were the leader themselves. Togami, Asahina, Fukawa, Kirisu, Hagakure, even Naegi himself, would all live under the fear of Dio one day deciding to kill them. Of him deciding to cut off the food, water, and even the air, keeping them alive. All from a single whim.

We're not being given a choice between life and death. We're being given a choice between fighting and suicide. Naegi wasn't going to let Dio get away with this. He wouldn't give in.

It was strange. Why did his body stop hurting? Holy Diver's attack had shattered Naegi's ribs and even did damage to his spine, and yet here he was, standing tall and feeling something completely different to pain in his chest.

A fire was the only way to describe it. As Naegi was driving himself forward, the fire within him was only growing brighter and stronger! It was even starting to mess with Naegi's sight and hearing. Just on top of him, he swore he could see some kind of whitish pulse coming towards the others.

Speaking of the others, Naegi only now noticed that some of their wounds were missing. Had it really been that long since they fought against Dio without his Stand?
No. It was just a trick of the mind. The intensity of the situation was starting to get to them all, Naegi included. Jin Kirigiri was even looking away from Dio, towards that arrow-head that came out of that Murralsee Ball (and had been painful to land on), eyes wide open and hand stretched out towards it. The others had formed a wall of bodies enough that this was blocked from Dio's sight.

Was the Headmaster thinking of using it, if they had to fight again? Naegi took that as a sign that he was getting to at least one person, and prayed it'd be the same with Kirigiri herself.

"Do you trust Dio to never harm us again, if we kneel?" Naegi knew that Kirigiri's logic was being blinded by fear. Horrifying truths were keeping her from the wider picture.

Kirigiri herself seemed to realise this, staying silent until five seconds passed. "Uncertainty is better than certainty of death." She said, not believing her own words.

"Indeed, Ultimate Detective." Dio's voice cut through, and he had Muramasa in hand, but there was no edge to his words. He was speaking to them as a man would with an extremely stubborn and stupid puppy. Indulgence. "I wonder why I'm letting you do this, Naegi. The years I spent in this school seem to have moved me more than I expected. It's why I allowed you all what I did not allow others; a chance to live in peace."

"You got that-"

"Useless!" Dio's roar easily overcame Naegi's counter. "It is useless to deny it. I could have thrown you out into the outside world where you tried to hide from. Forced to gulp down air thick with poison, scavenging the land for scraps of garbage to eat and drink, and forced to experience the aftermath of The World's End."

Fukawa raised a hand and tried to speak. "I thought it was called the Biggest-"

"Don't repeat that mouthful of garbage to me. The history written by Dio will have no space for such a pitiful name. Now it is time for you to decide, Naegi. Surrender or die. You have one minute."

Dio's voice lost that earlier indulgence. It was now blunt and violent, much like a hammering swinging down on a nail.

One minute to decide.

*I guess I'll have to make it count.* Naegi already had his answer. He was not going to surrender to Dio, but instead make that minute count for all he could. Dio was wrong, as with a lot of things, about Naegi, when he said that his luck was one of his best attributes. *It's my optimism. My can-do attitude. That's the only good thing about me. Now I just have to share it with the others.*

Naegi turned his back on Dio and towards the others and let the fire in his stomach burst out. The words came shooting out of his mouth like bullets from a machine-gun, aimed straight at the first target he saw, as he pointed a finger right at the Ultimate Clairvoyant's face.

"Hagakure, I know it's crazy to think of challenging someone like Dio. I'm even wondering what's supposed to happen to save us, but still," Naegi let his whole body shake as the chill of Dio's glare fell on him. "Can you truly see a future living under someone like Dio Brando? Is that the life you want?"

The intensity of the situation was getting to him. Naegi could have sworn that, as he finished his
sentence, a golden bullet shot out and struck Hagakure. That must have just been his imagination, as Hagakure himself changed from a look of despondency and panic to one of growing confidence.

"No...no!" Hagakure's head lifted up high and pointed straight at Dio. Not even the soft growl from the throned man seemed to scare him off. "I wanna live, Naegs! And not just live, but live in a happy ending. A happy ending as far away from that guy as possible."

Naegi wasted no time and turned to Asahina. She looked so defeated, unable to decide between which emotion to feel right now, whether red-hot anger at Dio or black despair at what must have seemed like an inability to save her friend. Unable to decide what to do, she was readying herself to simply let Oogami's murderer decide her future.

That might have been why she let out a soft gasp at how quickly Naegi turned to her.

"Sakura Oogami was the Ultimate Fighter and Dio killed her. He probably thinks that now makes him the Ultimate Fighter, and maybe he's right in terms of fighting skull, but he will never be like Oogami." Naegi's free hand found itself caught in a grip, his own nails biting down on his palm. "Because she was more than the Ultimate Fighter! If she was allowed to say the words Dio took from her, it'd be to tell you to live on. To not give up. To carry the hope that she entrusted to you. Asahina, don't let Oogami's death make you forget how she'd want you to live."

It happened again. Another bullet seemed to shoot forward and strike Asahina right in the chest, making impact at the same time as Kirigiri let out a gasp for some reason. There was no time to see what it was, not when he only had seconds to rally the others for the fight against Dio. Naegi couldn't turn back now, he had to keep advancing.

"Strength comes from standing up to adversity. Sakura always said that." Asahina stood up and looked down at Oogami's body. Tears ran down her face but her eyes had something new to them. A strength that Oogami would have smiled upon. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you when you needed me. Maybe if I stand where you stood, I can make it up to you. Maybe by showing my guts, I can be like you."

"What is this?" Dio growled. Naegi almost turned back to reply when someone else beat him to it.

"Hope, Dio," Jin said. The Headmaster's glare was something to behold. "Is not something you can control as if it's a tool."

Naegi was free to turn towards Togami, so broken that he didn't even try to throw a cowering Fukawa off his arm, simply standing there in wait for his fate. Nothing like the prideful heir who never bowed to anyone.

"Togami, maybe there's nothing left of the Togami Group as a business, but you're still standing, aren't you? Dio is, and always was, wrong about you. The kind of guy who makes millions on the stock market never needed the Togami Group to reach the top." Naegi said. For the third time now, he pointed right at Togami's face and let his feeling run wild. "Fight back against Dio, rise up to the top from the bottom, and show him and the world just who Byakuya Togami is."

"What's in your hand, Jin?" Dio said, Naegi barely hearing him over the sound of a bullet shooting forward. Had Naegi hit his head on that wall? "Your counterparts will be arriving soon." Dio added when the Headmaster said nothing. A warning of some kind.

Naegi almost turned back when Togami opened his mouth.
"Don't think I needed your words to bring me back from the brink. Byakuya Togami doesn't need the pleas of plebians to know when to fight." Togami's snobbish put-down had never been so welcome. That cold flame in his eyes was back and the full force of his contempt was directed solely at Dio. "I said I'd be the one to kill the Mastermind. I did it before, and I'll do it again, Dio."

"You dare look at Dio with those eyes?" Dio spat the words out as if they were a foul meal he unknowingly bit into. This whole triumph must have been nothing like he expected.

"Master does dare. And I do too. I'll follow my beloved to the ends of the earth." Fukawa tightened her grip on Togami's arm.

"Don't touch me." He ordered, enough to make Fukawa almost leap off the limb. "Change yourself. We'll need the Genocider for this battle. I won't have you dying on me."

Only one person remained for Naegi to convince towards his side. Forty seconds had passed. He could still do this. There was no pain, or hesitation, but only the laser-focus that normally came only to boxers or soldiers during a moment of truth. Where seconds slowed down and became minutes, if not hours.

He pointed to her.

"Kirigiri, I know it seems as if there's no hope left. That we can't beat Dio, no matter what, but..." Naegi had to think about his next words. "Your father put us all here because he thought it'd protect hope. Maybe he was wrong. You can't put hope in a glass bottle and preserve it. It has to be grown again. It has to be able to overcome the tasks ahead of it. Kirigiri, please, if hope seems to be fading away then we'll become the new hope."

The final bullet—whether real or not-struck Kirigiri and had the same effect as it did on the others. Her eyes brightened and her whole body became at ease. "Naegi, if you could see how you look right now." She smiled and pointed back at him. "Everyone was wrong about you. You're not the Ultimate Lucky Student. You're the one who is fighting against Dio even now, the one who is trying to restore our faith. It takes a certain Talent to do that. I'd say the Ultimate Hope's a good a title as any."

That was it. A minute passed and Naegi had managed to shatter the pall of despair that Dio had thrown the others into. What remained of Class 78, if not Hope's Peak itself, was ready to fight! The fire had left Naegi's stomach but only to shroud his whole body. The slight hum he heard had only grown louder and everyone almost seemed cloaked in a white-gold aura, just after most of them had been hit by those bullets.

Looking around them now, it wasn't just their expressions that looked stronger, but their bodies too. All of their wounds were gone! Their clothes still had the holes and cuts but their skin and flesh was as fine as ever. How was that the case?

Whatever it was, it might have been the same reason that everyone was looking at him with confusion and awe at the same time.

"I-Impossible." Dio was now stuttering. Perhaps he truly didn't expect their hope to be so strong that it even withstood his Holy Diver. "I designed that machine to only release it when coded to."

"Dio, so long as we have hope," Naegi turned in place and pointed a finger right at the face of Dio
Brando. "We'll never lose to you!"

The sight of a bulked-out Murralsee, glaring daggers at Naegi, lurking behind Dio's throne almost brought out a gasp. He restrained himself to avoid undermining his stand, but it was clear why the others seemed so shocked. It was definitely a sight to fear, not least because its body and height were somehow larger than even Dio himself.

It was nothing compared to how Dio looked. This was meant to be his de facto coronation and Naegi had probably ruined it all because of his refusal to just lay down and die. Or perhaps it was the sound of that hum coming from somewhere, or that white-gold sheen that seemed to be covering the room itself.

Dio stood up from his throne and kept a firm grip on Muramasa. "The Arrow. How did you-"

"Hagakure." Jin said, before anyone else could reply. Naegi swore that Dio almost popped a blood-vessel at that.

"So your Stand can only stay invisible for so long, huh, Dio?" Naegi tried to think of a way to exploit that before he felt a soft tap on his shoulder. He looked back to see Togami almost-glaring at him for some reason, but mostly Kirigiri pointing upwards. Naegi lifted his head up to see what she was pointing at.

What Naegi saw was another him. Yet that wasn't the case. Looking closer, this thing might have had his clothes and general form, but there were key differences. It may have been humanoid but its skin was the same colour as the bullets and sheen of the room, that whitish-gold tiny. Not only that, but where Naegi's ahoge was just a quirk of his hair, the clone's version seemed to be some kind of signal-emitter. It was like those pictures of a radio tower, only the circular signal it sent out was the same colour as its skin.

Not to mention that fact that its fingers were shaped exactly like gun barrels.

"I wouldn't say we at Hope's Peak were completely wrong to assign him the 'Ultimate Lucky Student' title, Kirigiri." The Headmaster said. Somehow, despite the Murralsee armour and his injuries, he was now standing just as tall as the others were. He even smirked, eyes more on Dio than Naegi. "It's not everyone who falls flat on a Stand Arrow."

"You think your Stand will save you, Naegi? You think any of your Stands are enough?" Dio's right eye was twitching and he seemed ready to go on the attack. That was when he stopped himself. Two seconds passed and the rage was gone from his face, replaced by calm superiority. "I suppose it's Naegi's Stand that's made you all fall into the delusion that you have even the slightest chance of victory. Holy Diver!"

A wave of purple-black energy shot out from Holy Diver and went straight for the survivors, too fast for any of them to react. Just as quickly as it came, however, it passed through them without a single touch of pain. Naegi looked at the others in case they were hurt, then looked at his own body. Not a single sign that they had been hurt.

So why was it that Jin Kirigiri's face was pale as snow and Asahina was quivering in place, holding her mouth in shock, as she looked behind herself.

"Sakura!" Asahina screamed as she ran towards the now-levitating corpse of her best friend.
She couldn't even get close before the body shot forward, forcing her to move to the side, and towards the throne. Naegi and Asahina turned their heads back towards Dio in time to see something that chilled them to their bones. Horrifying enough that they were frozen in place. Of course Dio would do this. He had revealed himself to be the worst kind of villain.

But how could someone prepare for the sight of their classmates' corpses hovering in their air, acting almost like a shield for their killer? Naegi barely noticed the sounds of the doorways to the Execution room-where Kuwata and Oowada had been murdered-creaking open to likely let in the pack of Murralsees that Dio had commanded to move in. How could he think of strategy at a time like this?

Dio had said that he could command life and death. But words and the actual sight were two completely different things. How could anyone truly know how it felt to see our friends and classmates return again, but know that it'd be as slaves?

It was enough to send bile up his throat to see Oogami's head slowly move to attach itself to her body again. The gash left by the Muramasa blade had taken off half of her neck and yet the near-detached limb merged with her body again as easily as pushing broken halves of soap together. But this was a human body! The bruises and indents left by Holy Diver's fists shouldn't have disappeared as quickly as they did.

The same applied for the others. Maizono's stab wound was nowhere to be found, nor any sign of blood or even a flaw on her uniform, whilst Kuwata's bruised and bloodied corpse had turned into a picture-perfect image. There was no sign of the wound left by the dumbbell on Fujisaki's head, nor could you look at Oowada's body and think that he had been thrown against a moving truck and turned to roadkill.

Ishimaru looked like himself again. Not only free of wounds but also the influence of 'Kiyondo Ishida', black hair instead of white, whilst Yamada was as peaceful as his dying breath but you'd think he was only sleeping. Celestia herself was the image of a sleeping princess in need of a prince's kiss. It was probably her dream to be thought of such.

If only Naegi could get the mental image of that metal chain digging into her flesh enough to tear into it. To make her face turn violet blue as she gasped and gulped for oxygen. Dio had made the Headmaster almost rip her head off for the crime of revealing his secrets, and yet here she was. They all looked as if they were sleeping. There were no signs of the horrors done to them ever since this Mutual Killing Game began. Naegi would have given anything to have his friends alive and well again.

But not like this. Anything but this. He knew what was going to happen. They weren't going to come back as themselves. Dio wouldn't have allowed that. There was no sign that Dio had done anything wrong just by looking at them. Just as their bodies proclaimed his innocence, their minds had probably been polluted as payment.

Why, Dio? Why would you go this far? Naegi tried to think of anyone who would do this. Who could be so cruel as to force the survivors of this game to fight against the people they were fighting for. He swallowed the vomit down and waited for the worst to happen.

The dead of Class 78 opened their eyes.

"Naegi, it's so good to see you again." Maizono said, not a drop of blood on her, beaming and holding her hands together. "I don't know if I mean because of the Killing Game or because of the
"It's only natural that Lord Dio's ability to resurrect the dead can even transcend the deletion of our memories." Yamada said, stroking his chin as if it was a normal day and he wasn't fighting to be heard over the sounds of Hagakure screaming in fear.

"There's no time for nostalgia!" Ishimaru declared, his voice carrying that same determination as ever. Only now it was serving a cause that didn't deserve one bit of his efforts. "Lord Dio is counting on us to keep our classmates from making the worst mistakes of their lives."

There was a hum of agreement from the rest of the resurrected at those words. Dio kept the tip of Muramasa's blade on the ground and leaned towards the pommel; a dark smile was on his smile as it was clear that this was his final trump-card to break their spirits. It was no longer a question of logic or strategy. This was a matter of pride.

The kind of pride he denied the people he had now brainwashed.

"Asahina, I know that Naegi's Stand is making you think that I was going to tell you to fight," Oogami said, Asahina softly whimpering whilst Naegi felt himself grow angrier. Did Dio really have no morals? "But believe me when I say that I was planning to tell you to save yourself. To understand that I had fought all I could and Lord Dio still surpassed me. Please, for the sake of our friendship, accept Lord Dio's mercy."

"Come on, Togami, you really think you can face up to Lord Dio?" Oowada added. Naegi wondered if Holy Diver somehow made them say it to appease Dio's ego, or if this was just a side-effect of its command over their souls. "He gave you a pretty big shiner last time you fought. I don't wanna see my classmates die anymore. Man's promise; Lord Dio's gonna let you live if you just swallow your damn pride and bow."

"Kirisu, I'm grateful for everything you've done with Alter Ego, but he's still a young AI." Fujisaki's eyes were alight with admiration for the monster behind him. "He deserves to advance the world of AI and humanity. Not destroy himself trying to defeat a man like Lord Dio. His strength is just off the charts. I kind of wish I was that manly when I was alive."

"I know you got big dreams, but dreams change. First I wanted to play baseball, then I wanted to be a rock-star," Kuwata slammed the palm of his left hand against his right inner elbow and had a determined smile on his face. "Now I wanna make sure Lord Dio's world comes to be. Might as well give in to a higher power."

"Indeed. I may have lied about adapting to the Mutual Killing Game, but believe this sinful liar when she says that we must adapt to Lord Dio's will." Celes put a hand on her heart, eyes shut, and serenely addressed the survivors as if lecturing children. "Taeke Yasuhiro, Celestia Ludenberg, both are nothing compared to the destiny that Lord Dio sees. If our Fate is to be the rungs on the ladder towards Heaven, then our happiness lies in adapting to such. At least you get the chance to avoid dying before realising this."

Naegi never knew he could hate Dio's chuckle until that very moment.

"You see? In death, they have gained peace of mind. Free from the shackles of the past and anxieties for the future, they simply live content with the knowledge of their Fate. A pre-determined harmony awaits you." Dio raised Muramasa and pointed it straight at Naegi. "Kneel before Dio and your punishment will be light."
"Naegi, please, I can read you easily. You're only doing this to do right by us, to try and keep hope alive, but this is for the best. If you only knew what Lord Dio has planned for the world," Maizono held her hands together and looked as if she was the one meant to be begging. A tearful, yet hopeful, smile came to her. "Bow, Naegi. Do it for me."

Naegi's heart wavered for only a moment. The sight of the girl he knew from middle school, before she went on to become an idol, and who was meant to have been his close companion during all of this was now telling him to give in. He looked up to find his Stand gripping his hands tight enough that it might have cut into its palms, if it had nails, and looked back to see the others.

Maizono was not alone. A choir of the damned erupted in pleas and demands for the living to surrender themselves to Dio's rule. Asahina and Hagakure were the ones who were really shaken by the sight of their dead friends-although had Fukawa not been replaced by Syo, she might have joined them from fright of the dead-Whilst Togami and Kirigiri stayed firm.

Dio just looked down on them smiling. At this point, he was now the child who spent their days plucking wings off insects to get that rush of power and joy from hurting another being. If he thought it'd break Naegi, he was wrong. All it did was convince Naegi of the need to fight that much harder.

Naegi looked to Jin and Kirigiri before staring up at his Stand. Both father and daughter nodded and Naegi turned back towards those who Dio had brought back to life.

If those bullets had something to do with his reaching the hearts of the survivors, then maybe...

"Everyone," Naegi stood tall and his Stand readied itself. "You got that wrong."

Ten bullets shot out from the Stand's fingers. They burned as bright as the last ones did, fuelled by Naegi's hope and memories, as they sailed past the victims and went straight for the Mastermind. Holy Diver scoffed and its fists easily met the bullets, shouting 'useless' with each and every bullet it seemingly smashed away.

As Dio laughed at what must have been a pitiful attempt to harm him, Naegi wasted no time turning to the others. The true targets of his efforts.

"Your minds have been taken away by Dio. He hasn't given you peace of mind, he's taken away your future. But we can take it back." Naegi decided to go down the list of Dio's victims in this Mutual Killing Game. "Maizono, what about your band-mates, and not being forgotten? Dio destroyed that, doesn't that make you upset? Kuwata, your dreams-whether it was baseball or music-had worth. Worth that Dio doesn't care about.

"Fujisaki, strength isn't about physicality or winning, it's about being able to face your fears. The Chihiro I knew, willing to reveal their secret to keep everyone together, was stronger than Dio ever was. Oowada, you wanted to build things after the Crazy Diamonds. Don't let Dio turn you into someone who can only destroy.

"Ishimaru, how can someone change others through effort if you let Dio turn you into a mouthpiece of his dogma? Yamada, you wanted your works to reach people's hearts, even if it's doujin, while Dio just wants to dominate people's hearts. Could someone like you ever get what inspired you in Dio's world. Celestia, I thought you wanted to have your own castle with servants and knights. Maybe you wanted something else. Maybe you just wanted to be the kind of girl who was never ordinary. But you definitely didn't want to be nothing more than Dio's Rank C!"
"Oogami, please. The warrior I knew would have never spent her final words trying to convince her friend to serve someone like Dio. Would Keichiro have wanted you to accept defeat to the likes of Dio Brando? You spoke of your family's dojo and history with pride. What was that pride worth if it means surrendering to an absolute evil like Dio's plans?"

As Naegi spoke to them, he could feel his Stand bursting with energy. The Hope and memories that Dio had sealed away to drive them to kill one another, the bonds they formed in this building despite that, and the dreams and desires that they lived for before this whole tragedy. Every last bit of energy from them was getting ready to burst out.

It was even enough that the survivors behind Naegi were rallying just from the exposure to that energy.

Dio watched him with disdain. Maybe he decided that since the bullets could do no harm, the size and intensity of it didn't matter when compared to Holy Diver's raw power and speed. It didn't stop the Ultimate Master from getting his Stand ready to deflect the blasts that were going to come from the opposing Stand.

Naegi ignored Dio. All he cared about and focused on were his classmates.

"Everyone, remember your hopes and dreams. Remember the past we can't and think of the futures we all dreamed of. Dio took that away from you. Dio's even taken your desires and replaced it with his own." Naegi pointed ahead and his Stand lifted its hands to point the barrels straight ahead. "Is that who you want to decide your Fates? Please, remember what he took away from you."

The sound of the bullets-more like 'Hope Bullets' than the real thing-firing was closer to a machine-gun than ten pistols being fired at once. The Hope Bullets themselves were massive compared to the ones before, probably because of the larger energy within them, but were as fast as ever. They shot towards the revived members of Class 78 and were a second away from striking their hearts.

"I have no intention of losing these servants." Dio didn't even have to move as Holy Diver shot forward and began to unleash a barrage of fists against the missiles. "Useless, useless, useless, useless!"

As the fists made contact, the missiles became golden explosions that emitted no heat but more than made up for it in wind pressure and light. Naegi had to cover his eyes to keep himself from going blind from the sight. That didn't matter. He knew in his heart that Dio was discovering something that Naegi himself only knew by instinct. The basic bodily functions that you didn't even have to think about, lest you move too slowly.

Those Hope Bullets broken apart by Holy Diver were not just any missile. They were cluster-missiles. Inside each and every one of them carried smaller missiles that shot forward even in spite of their container's destruction. Inside them was the same energy and hope that were in the previous missiles.

What was more was how none of the missiles even tried to reach Dio. It was almost sad how shocked he looked when realising that he was never the target.

"Not everything's about you, Dio." Kirigiri said, under her breath, just enough that Dio could hear her.
"Holy Diver's speed is unmatched!" He snapped, Holy Diver already moving to strike the new, smaller missiles. "You can't reach them all."

"Yes I can." Naegi vowed.

It was a battle between the speed of the Hope Bullets, trying to reach the hearts of those who had fallen under Dio's spell, and the one that cast that spell. Holy Diver quicker than Naegi thought, moving faster than even the speed of sound, as its fists slammed against each and every missile that came close to Class 78. Most of them had closed their eyes against the intensity of the wind pressure The light and wind pressure was soon too much for anyone to look at. Naegi had to simply look away as he saw the smaller and smaller Hope Bullets disappear from sight as Holy Diver struck them each time.

Not one of them seemed to have hit even a single class member, before the Ultimate Luckster looked away. When he looked back, Dio's expression told him everything he needed to know.

"I hit them all, Naegi." Dio said, Holy Diver's smirk just like its master's. "Holy Diver's fists move like lightning. It plucked your earnest words and crushed them with its fists before they reached the hearts of your friends. You're a rainbow in the dark, however beautiful your light, it is still swallowed by the darkness with no one to ever see it."

"Dio, Holy Diver is powerful, but you can't win. The numbers are now against you. Do you really think you can defeat six Stand users?" The Headmaster said. Naegi mentally counted a Murralsee, however weakened, among their numbers as well.

"I have nineteen Murralsee all converging on your location, and my classmates have generously sworn themselves to me." Dio laughed to himself and motioned a finger at Naegi. "I'll sic the Steering Committee on Naegi. Whatever his Stand does, it obviously strengthens the heart. Pitch-black ambition will swallow it whole without mercy."

"Y-You're not gonna be so confident when we beat you. We did it once, and we'll do it again." Hagakure tried his best glare as all the attention in the room fell on this showdown between Dio and the survivors.

"Hagakure, I will enjoy crushing your skull." Dio growled. "I let you win that time to better crush your spirits. Now? I am done with catering to your needs and my short-term desires. You think you can stand up against twenty Murralsee and your beloved classmates? You think you can overcome Holy Diver? Fools! I will show you, the Future Foundation, and all those who doubt in the power of Dio that this is the dawn of the new world! Your struggles are completely and utterly use-"

Dio was cut off by the left side of his face getting smashed by the back wheel of a motorcycle.

Blood and skin shot out from his howling face as the wheel shot up from his cheek to his skull, as Mondo Oowada adjusted his motorcycle so that it would land before slamming against the wall of the Class Trial room. There was barely enough time for Dio to place a hand on his face, immediately healing his wounds, when he stumbled into a well-muscled fist landing straight on his gut.

All of this in the span of three seconds; the pain too much for Dio to direct Holy Diver to save him.

The Ultimate Male Model corrected himself before stumbling too far back. It was just in time for him to realise that, whilst he had been bragging of his victory, Oowada had sneaked into the open
Execution room and grabbed an intact bike. It was also in time for him to realise that those who he brought back from the dead were no longer looking at him with adoring eyes. That much was obvious from Sakura Oogami moving from the steps of the throne to strike at him.

No. The expressions on their faces could only be described as absolute fury.

Dio’s mind, normally so quick to find the answer, seemed unable to register what he was seeing. "How-"

"I don't know how I knew, but I just did." Naegi said. Dio turned his head back to feel the full-force of the Ultimate Hope's glare. "You can't just destroy what's in people's hearts. No matter how hard you hit, you can't erase the feelings humans hold for their close ones! My Hope Bullets just broke apart again and again until not even your eyes could see them, and they still reached their hearts."

"That's right." Maizono looked at him and did nothing to hide her tears. "Naegi, I'm so sorry for what I did, for what I just did, just everything! All the times we spent as friends, all the things we shared, and what we promised at Hope's Peak, and I just-"

"Maizono, it's okay. I am sure that Naegi has already forgiven.," Oogami said. Knowing the power and fighting skill of Dio, she could only spare Asahina a brief apologetic look. "What matters now is that we stand and fight now. That we do not let Dio win after all he has done."

"Do you understand now, Dio?" Kirigiri said. She stepped forward and Naegi could almost swear that there was someone behind her. All dressed up like an old-time detective, down to the deer-hunter and everything. "You can force your will on us all you like, and nothing will change. We'll never stop fighting. Just like humanity will never stop fighting against your despair so long as we have hope."

"You hear that?" Oowada's voice easily overcame his bike's engine. "This is the sound of us getting ready to kick your ass so hard the shit'll only have to come out of one hole instead of two!"

Mondo drove his motorcycle around the room and began to throw certain objects that he held on his left hand. To hold onto so many items and still have control over his motorcycle like that. Oowada truly was the Ultimate Biker.

Ishimaru had a kendo stick, Kuwata a baseball bat, and others had make-shift weapons like crowbars and hammers, and all the tools that must have gone into building the death-traps in the Execution Room. Objects once designed to enable their torment, now were weapons to ensure their freedom from Dio.

Naegi could hear metallic marching in the distance. The Murralsee, nineteen in number according to Dio, were approaching. Whether they had the steel-chain whips like Jin did was something they'd have to find out, most of their attention now on Holy Diver readying itself for a fight. This was it. The true final battle that would end it all.

Flickers of doubt came to Naegi. His Stand wasn’t meant for combat. That was obvious now. Would the same be true for the others? How would people like Fujisaki and Maizono defend themselves? Would six Stands and Oowada and Oogami together be enough to stop Dio?

No. I have to have hope. Hope in myself. Hope in my friends. And last, but definitely not least. Hope in my Stand. Livin' On A Prayer!
Stand Stats

**Holy Diver**

**User:** Dio Brando  

**Stats**
- Destructive Power A
- Speed A
- Range C
- Durability A
- Precision B
- Developmental Potential B

**Abilities**

User can nullify effect on self. Only activates via physical contact by the hands of user or Holy Diver.

Resurrection of the dead as servants. Appearance and name must be known to the user. Strength and willingness to obey relative to knowledge of the resurrected, however, those resurrected can break free of control if given sufficient emotional stimuli or physical trauma. Resurrection cannot be cancelled once done and user must either kill those brought back, or kill themselves, to cancel the effect.

This ability requires sufficient soul energy from those killed by user or Holy Diver directly. Can **Access Denied. Requires Headmaster-level security clearance.**

**Livin' On A Prayer**

**User:** Makoto Naegi  

**Stats**
- Destructive Power E
- Speed B
- Range B
- Durability C
- Precision A
- Developmental Potential B

**Abilities**

Stand is able to turn user's positive emotions into channel energy that can be transmitted to those considered not an enemy via ahoge on Stand. This both heals wounds and enhances physical abilities of those affected. User can use this ability on themselves to heal.

Stand can fire 'Hope Bullets' made from positive feelings of user and memories between user and target. Can increase positive feelings and willpower within target when hit. Cannot create feelings and cannot reverse negative feelings; only enhance positive ones for affected to fight negative emotions with.
How could this be? How could Naegi's Luck have caused such chaos to Dio's machinations?

Was Naegi's Luck stronger than Komaeda's? No, it couldn't have been. Komaeda's luck had seemed so powerful, able to preserve him through tragedy after tragedy, and had its own pattern. All you needed to do was understand that pattern and master it., something a dog like Komaeda never could, but the theory seemed to hold for the other Ultimate Lucksters. Yet Naegi's own luck defied all of Dio's reasoning.

There was no pattern. There were just random bursts of extreme good luck and bad luck. How could something like that be called a Talent?

Now he has a Stand. Dio could only grit his teeth further. The Murralsee Machine had been designed to never release the Stand Arrow unless Matsuda programmed it to, and Matsuda had received no such order from Dio. Even if he joined Jin's betrayal, he didn't have the freedom to change the coding. He remembered Kazuichi telling him of an error in the mechanics that meant there was a chance of it being chosen by the machine. But that could hardly be called a chance. Those odds were the same as getting the exact same hand after a deck of cards had been shuffled.

And Hagakure was the one who collected it?

No. It must have been Naegi's Luck at work, unconsciously warping probability, or worse. Was this Komaeda's Luck cursing Dio?

That couldn't have been the case. The control he had over the renegade Despair was absolute. There must have been another reason that fate would betray Dio and there would be a later time to think about it.

Not when Dio was caught in a battle like this. A war that was gradually destroying the entire Class Trial room with every second that passed.

"Why do you continue to fight against me, Oogami?" Dio asked, dodging each of her strikes as they came. The wounds from the Murralsee were catching up with her. "If I die, Holy Diver's powers fade away, you know. You'll simply be dooming yourselves and the others to death yet again."

"If you died yesterday, I would be alive. If you die today, six others will live and the world will be saved." Oogami ended her little speech with a side-kick that Dio just narrowly ducked under. "If it means saving the life of a friend, I would gladly give my own away a thousand times."

"If that's what you wish." Dio replied. Oogami was struck back by Holy Diver's right elbow. It took
more than being able to see Holy Diver—an unfortunate side-effect of being risen again—to battle with it.

The Ultimate Fighter twisted and turned her body enough that she managed to land on her feet again. Rather than waste time on Dio, she moved on towards destroying the Murralsee that were trying to end the non-combatants of Class 78. That order had been much easier to give when the Murralsee weren't turning against one another.

Livin' On A Prayer. Just the name was enough to anger him. Had Dio known just what that Stand was capable of, he'd have simply forced Naegi to engage in a physical battle between their Stands, instead of trying to break him psychologically. Had he not been blinded by a nostalgia for the memories he made, he'd have had their submission by now. Instead, he was going to have to kill them in front of the whole world.

It was unfortunate. Killing his classmates hadn't been fun the way that breaking Hope's Peak had been. Some of them were even worthy of his respect like Oogami's strength, Kirigiri's mind, and Naegi's determination, if a constant cause of frustration. Still, they had left him no other choice.

Absolute despair. That was the necessary condition for the world to be in for the next stage of his plan. The plan to bring about peace of mind to the world itself needed Dio to be in a position of absolute authority and to be feared across the planet. How could anyone fear a man who could not even kill his own captives?

Now he was seeing those damn Hope Bullets pierce through the Murralsee and slowly release the mental and spiritual bindings that Dio had locked them in. The Steering Committee remained loyal but failed to even meet Naegi in combat with the other survivors unleashing their Stands. It gave Naegi the safety needed to use Livin' On A Prayer.

The Student Council made up the bulk of his Murralsee and were already tearing each other apart instead of Class 78. It was getting to the point where the number of fighters under Naegi were outnumbering Dio's enough to confront him personally. Matsuda had long-since defected, perhaps even before then if Jin had truly given Kirigiri advice, impossible unless the surveillance was compromised by the one overseeing it, and was assisting in pointing out who to strike to Naegi.

This was not how things were meant to be.

"Hey, Dio!" Kuwata's voice cut through the general thunder of battle, coming from the Execution Room. Dio turned in time for Holy Diver to catch a baseball-flying fast enough that the heat rippled against his skin-aimed right at his skull. The first killer was wreathed in a golden aura, arm already stretched back to throw again. "Plenty more where that came from."

A flurry of baseballs travelling at the same speed came flying at him. To throw them at speeds so fast that the wind around the baseballs almost caught fire around them? Who else but the Ultimate Baseball Star could perform such a feat? But for someone to meet every last one of them with a stronger and faster strikes? To move at speeds unknown to the common man?

Who else but the Ultimate Master?

"You think this is enough to catch me off-guard? Fool! Holy Diver is beyond the Talents of mere humans." Dio began to slowly advance towards Kuwata. The boy whose dreams were determined by others could never match the drive of someone like Dio Brando. He could see the sweat dripping from Kuwata's face even just steps away from his throne.
Dio felt a sudden change in the temperature, a slight drop in the heat compared to the fireballs that exploded against Holy Diver's fists, and the Stand immediately changed its focus so that it was now deflecting two rapid-fires. One ahead of Dio with Kuwata, and another to his right with Asahina. The difference was that, instead of baseballs, Asahina's barrage was of pressurised water bullets. 

*She's learnt the secrets of her Stand quickly.* Dio spared Asahina a glance.

The fire behind her glaring eyes confirmed his suspicions. Her bonds were what gave her strength. Just as breaking them would break her, the thought of protecting them drove her on. It was enough that it fuelled the fury and precision of her Stand. It was no small task to make a bulbous humanoid, filled to the brim with water, look at all threatening when it had a life-saver wrapped around its mid-section.

The Ocean; that was what she called it. A fitting name for a Stand that could summon water itself to strike at Asahina's enemies. Yet what troubled Dio most was the brief sights he saw of Asahina trapping a Murralsee between her legs. She was stronger than she looked, but the way that both of them levitated and moved-as if they were underwater itself-raised his suspicions. He would have to keep his distance when fighting her.

For now, he was content with slowly advancing towards Kuwata whilst deflecting two barrages at once. Let them witness his power in full!

"Attack me from two sides all you like. It won't matter!" Dio took another step and relished Kuwata's meek yelp. The baseballs were losing some of their energy as Kuwata lost his nerve. "Holy Diver is unbeatable. You think we are the only ones with Stands? My army is filled with such people. I have personally tested Holy Diver against nearly every single one of their Stands and triumphed! Holy Diver is a Stand that surpasses all others."

Only one could ever match Holy Diver and that could not truly be described as a Stand. Stands were manifestations of fighting spirit, whilst its user abomination had no such spirit or true soul. The nature of his Stand was proof enough of that.

Dio might have reflected further, deflecting both high-pressure water bullets and baseballs a simple task for Holy Diver, when he felt a change in the wind to his left. Holy Diver moved to intercept and slammed its fists against the projectiles.

*So he's using Gold now.* Togami's Stand was disgusting to look at. A solid-gold copy of Byakuya Togami looked at Dio as if he was scum, even as tiny golden bullets shot out of its chest and air-boxing fists, whilst its user shared that same smug look of disdain. As if Dio was nothing more than a piece of dog-shit on the road.

By the time Dio was done with him, Togami would wish he was dog-shit.

Still, this was now a problem. Dio had been forced to stop completely in his tracks. Flaming baseballs from the centre, water bullets to the right, and now golden bullets from the left, all of which was having to be deflected by Holy Diver. One barrage was easy, two simply needed his attention, but three required all of Dio's precision to keep them from touching him.

Should he try to simply rush at Kuwata? The first blackened was having to rely on Hagakure to grab further baseballs to use as ammunition. A simple charge forward wouldn't give Dio any wounds that Holy Diver couldn't heal. Better to risk it now than deal with an annoyance later.
No. All that'd do is risk getting hit from behind by The Ocean and Gold. Dio had no attention of getting caught between two attacks and only able to defend himself against one of them. If even one of them struck the back of his neck, or pierced through his brain...

*I need to think. Who is the weak link in the chain? Kuwata only has so many baseballs to use, but there might be something else. Look for the difference between the patterns.* Dio shifted away enough of his attention that he was being grazed by some of the bullets from all sides.

It was worth it. For Dio noticed that both Gold and its bullets were getting smaller. All he had to do was look on the ground and see that the bullets, once deflected, were making their way back to Gold. A cocky grin came to him. *So Gold has to use its own body to fire the projectiles. The amount of gold it can use is finite as well. Good. Kuwata first, then Toga-

Sudden pain stopped him from thinking. Dio barely had time to look at the crystal shards flying in the air before the blood entered his eyes and blinded his vision. He could hear the sound of something breaking and a soft hiss, almost like gas escaping a container, when Dio felt his whole body roar in pain as the projectiles finally made their mark.

Bullets slammed against Dio and swept him off his feet. Whatever it was that blinded Dio, it had been a result of whatever attacked Holy Diver during his moment of distraction. The baseballs slammed against the chest of Holy Diver and cracked Dio's ribs, whilst the The Ocean and Gold's projectiles shot through skin and flesh, breaking bones along the way.

Dio felt a blade slice into his back and grunted in pain. That grunt became a scream as he felt the sensation of skin being sliced grow from that very cut. What was a simple piercing wound stretched out and covered the length of his back in a single line going from his left shoulder down to the right waist. It even slithered across his entire left shoulder. All to the chorus of a madwoman's cackle.

*Smells Like Teenage Spirit.* Dio should have known that Genocider Syo's Stand would have been one of the most dangerous of them all. A simple stab-wound was almost enough to cut his whole body in half!

That didn't mean he was dead. They could have torn off his limbs, break his spine in two, and flay his chest, and he would recover so long as he lived. Nothing would stop Dio Brando from achieving his destiny. Holy Diver simply had to move its attention towards the wounds on Dio's body, its hands quickly making contact with every wounded part, and he was restored to himself again in nearly every part.

Pride was the exception. The sound of Hagakure and Kuwata's laughter, both of them growing more distant as Dio was forced to again fight off Asahina and Togami's attacks, rang inside his head. The humiliation of a low-life like Hagakure somehow wounding him! It was enough to make him vomit.

"Told you it was useful for something, Togami!" The false-clairvoyant shouted as he ran back to where Naegi was. He was followed by a slow-moving purple-white gas cloud that was wafting against the breeze even now.

"Congratulations. Your Stand can give a vague idea of events seconds in the future when in a cheap crystal skull knock-off." Togami said with all his usual arrogant disdain. To think that these were the people giving Dio trouble where others collapsed without a fight.

He didn't know whether to feel pride in the classmates who were proving themselves worthy of
being a part of Dio's past, or rage that they were not simply dying to ensure his future.

It was the work of Livin' On A Prayer. It had re-awoken their hearts and now the dead were willing to put it all on the line to end Dio's life. They fought with every last bit of their being to strike even a single blow that could disarm him or put him at a disadvantage. All for that bit of hope that Naegi re-ignited within them.

He had turned those like Asahina, Syo, and Togami from people considering surrender to now going toe-to-toe with the remaining Murralsee. The Ocean's trap on that Murralsee had given Asahina the advantage she needed, as the Ultimate Swimmer, to land blows faster than the Murralsee could even react. What was worse was that it was one of the Steering Committee.

Smells Like Teenage Spirit was empowering Syo's rampage. With every blow that she took, each strike against the Murralsee only grew stronger. Where it was simply once striking at the weak points and letting them fall, now it had become a matter of tearing through their armour piece by piece. That was the only Stand whose secrets remained safe from Dio's mind.

Togami was simply finishing off those who Syo left in her dance. Between the three of them, most of the Murralsee who were manned by the Steering Committee had already been slain. The supposed elite-guard were crushed with barely a scratch on the others. So much for their delusions of grandeur.

It was not only the survivors who were acting out. The dead were resurrected by Dio's will could not be returned to the ground by will alone. If Dio was going to put them back in the dirt where they belonged, without dying himself, he'd have to kill them with or without the Murralsee. If only they'd get within Holy Diver's range.

Whenever Dio got close to them, Oowada would simply swoop in and pluck them away on his motorcycle. Did the vehicle never run out of gas? The Ultimate Biker had spent much of this battle slamming his wheels against the Murralsee loyal to Dio whenever it seemed like they were gaining the upper hand. Ishimaru simply lent support by using that kendo stick, slamming it against their helmets.

Naegi's Stand was making it even worse. For every Murralsee that managed to resist his Hope Bullets, there were those that were strengthened by them. They were feeding off Naegi's Hope like parasites and using it to strengthen their blows and heal their wounds.

Whether it was Oogami smashing apart the finest armour Kazuichi could build with her fists, having already disarmed three, or the treacherous Murralsee overpowering the loyal, or even Hifumi Yamada throwing himself on a Murralsee to weigh it down, they were achieving it. Dio's machinery of terror was becoming nothing more than a joke.

The sight of Muramasa on the ground only made things worse. The brief moment where Dio let his guard down and believed that he had still broken one of the members of Class 78. Taeko had bowed so low, begged so hard, and threw away her pride enough that Dio thought she still yearned for a chance to serve him. To accept her place in the new world.

He should have realised that he wasn't the only one who didn't care for how a victory was won. Dio held her head gently when Taeko snarled.

"I don't bow to Rank Fs." With a speed that only Livin' On A Prayer could have granted her, Taeko used her finger-claw to stab through Dio's right eye.
Muramasa had fallen from his hand and fell to the ground. There was no moment of freedom for him to pick it up again, barely having time to wrap a hand around Taeko's throat to crush it entirely, when Oogami intercepted with a punch from the right and Syo threw one of her scissors. The Ultimate Gambler retreated after that. Scurrying back to Naegi with her tail between her legs.

She simply rested their now with Fujisaki, Maizono, and her fellow traitors Jin and Matsuda. It looked as if the latter in particular was trying to tell Naegi something, having the Ultimate Luckster's full attention.

Damn it! Dio should have realised earlier that Matsuda had betrayed him. A death chosen for his utility and ties to the Izuru Kamukura Project, Yasuke still should have noticed Jin's deception last night and warned Dio of it. Unless he had been planning the same with Jin.

*I should have had Ultimate Despair assist me in this.* Dio thought to himself. They'd have spotted this treachery earlier, and they'd have helped him crush this rebellion by now.

Instead he was forced to watch as Kirigiri disabled another Murralsee from the Steering Committee with words alone. Not as in her words reached their hearts and made them hesitate. No, she literally stopped them with words. Truths spoken, and lies revealed, became 'Truth Bullets' fired from Detective Man's pistol. Unlike Livin' On A Prayer, the bullets came from a gun in the Stand's hand and actually pierced through.

The Murralsee couldn't move either of its arms or its left leg due to the words that pierced through each limb. It was easy for Jin to then knock the Murralsee unconscious with his fists alone.

All the while, as Dio observed each Stand and fighter's abilities, all the while fighting, Makoto Naegi simply stood there preaching. It was as if he was a holy relic; his very presence driving his followers forward. The Hope Bullets he spoke either healed or strengthened his allies, or worked to weaken the resolve of Dio's own followers.

This was a battle of the worlds just as it was a battle of the messiahs. The old world was being protected by Makoto Naegi. Foolish idealists who put their faith in a broken and flawed world filled with uncertainty and despair. Whereas Dio represented the new world. Born from the fires of war and the pits of despair, his world would be one where all of humanity would know the peace of mind that Dio had reached.

But first he needed to end the dying chokes of the old world.

*Enough of this. The Murralsee have served their purpose.* Dio moved back, Holy Diver having concerned itself with fighting back against any attack, and directed his Stand against the throne behind him. In a matter of seconds, it was broken apart into a series of broken wooden shards large enough that a single blow from one could concuss someone.

And a single sharp throw from Holy Diver would mean the body would be pierced.

The Murralsee had long since lost their helmets, barring the one Asahina was fighting. Their faces were revealed to the world as the two sides fought against each other with all they had, one side fighting to kill and the other fighting to give Naegi a chance to fire Hope Bullets. Not that a Hope Bullet could do anything against Dio's newest attack.

Holy Diver threw the fragments first at Dio's own Murralsee. The ones who wouldn't even budge if their master directed violence towards them. It would defy the place of a servant to try and avoid his
master's punishment, after all. The wood smashed through their skulls and the bodies of the
Murralsee fell to the ground in the blink of an eye.

Not even Asahina's target was safe, although the wood went stray on the mark and hit the side of the
skull. Blood flowed as if it was in water, heading towards the top, before Asahina dispelled The
Ocean's effect out of disgust.

The other Murralsee were distracted, as were the other enemies of Dio. 'Why would he kill his own
followers? Is this another ability of Holy Diver's?' That must have been what the traitor-Murralsee
were thinking before the next shards went through their own skulls. Some tried to dodge. All of them
failed, only Matsuda and Jin still living out of the original twenty.

Dio felt no sense of shame or horror for what he did to his servants. The Murralsee only lived again
by the will of Dio Brando and returned to the earth by the will of Dio Brando. He needed to remind
the world who ruled them now. It wasn't as if his own followers would be shocked.

Even his friend knew the kind of man Dio was. What mattered was not how victory was won but
only that it was gained. For the sake of the new world, Dio would sacrifice anything and anyone to
reach it.

He looked over at the horrified members of Class 78, particularly their aghast leader, who the others
were beginning to form a human wall around. The horror had come more from the deed than the
aftermath. There was no more blood as the corpses vanished into black mist, the spell of Holy Diver
ending as their souls returned to Holy Diver.

_Ashes to ashes, dust to dust._ Dio smiled to himself and turned his gaze towards Naegi.

"Makoto Naegi, you've proven too dangerous for me to allow you to live." Dio said, entering a
fighting pose as Holy Diver did the same. Now came the easy part. "I have seen enough of Livin' On
A Prayer to know its strengths and weaknesses. All you do is simply raise people up to become your
sword and shield. You heal them, make them stronger, and they're willing to throw away their lives
all for the sake of what you call hope. For someone like me, who has goals greater than any amount
of nostalgia, your Stand is worthless."

It was the same with the others. Hagakure's pitiful Stand could do nothing for combat and the rest
were nothing to Holy Diver. Kirigiri's Detective Man required too much ceremony and Togami's
Gold would shatter in a matter of seconds. All Dio needed to do with Syo was have her change back
into Fukawa and her life would end. Asahina's The Ocean was a potential threat, but nothing more
than Dio could handle.

All they did was dig their own graves, in the end.

"Dio, we've overcome your plans, your machines, and you're all that's left." Naegi, for the first time
in a while, looked at Dio with begging eyes. He was yearning to find whatever he thought he saw
before today. "It doesn't have to end this way, Dio. If you just surrender, I promise you'll get a fair
trial. If you help us fix the damage done to the world, maybe you can still live a peaceful life. But it
has to be now."

Any other person. Any one other than Makoto Naegi and Dio would have spat at them for daring to
mock him like this. To treat him as if he was some charity case when they were the ones on the
retreat, in some vain attempt at seizing the moral high ground.
Not Naegi. Dio had spent too long with him to mistake that open and naive heart for anything else. Naegi truly believed that Dio held even the slightest desire to turn back from his path, if he even could. It was enough to make him laugh.

"In another world, you'd truly be the Ultimate Hope," There was no need to be anything other than sincere. Dio prepared Holy Diver for what would come next, trusting only instinct to guide its hand to Muramasa. "But I, Dio, hold that title. For I rule over hope. I rule over despair. I rule over both the old world and the new. That is my fate and nothing will get in my way."

In a flash, Holy Diver seized the blade Muramasa and cracked it in three. That brief moment of confusion on everyone's face was just what Dio needed as his Stand threw the blade shards towards Naegi and Kirigiri. The heart and brain of the group were in enough danger that the others immediately intercepted the blades. Asahina's The Ocean caught the top half meant for Naegi and Togami's Gold did the same for the bottom half.

The third shard, mostly the pommel and a short blade, flew towards the Stand Arrow that was sitting just behind Jin. His fatherly instincts compelled him to move and try and protect Kirigiri before the Arrow, and his weakness cost him the latter as the insect design on the arrowhead cracked into pieces. It wasn't as if Dio didn't lack for them.

The shock and then relief of that attempt sealed the fates of those who turned their backs on Dio.

Many of Syo's scissors remained on the ground. Some broken by the Murralsee battle and others by Oowada's bike, but intact enough that they could still cut through the human body with enough force behind them. That kind of force was something Dio had in spades.

It was amusing how the deceased had assumed that the blades between both Dio and Holy Diver's fingers were meant for the still-living. None of them even thought about trajectory or the positioning of Dio's hands. They merely jumped forward and used their own bodies as human shields, to the cries of horror from those like Naegi and Asahina.

Dio gave them credit; there was bravery behind their movements. Throwing themselves forward towards the blades was a sacrifice all ten of them must have realised that they made. Even Matsuda and Jin moved into the firing line. All to save their last hope.

If only they realised that the blades were meant for them. That their choice had sealed the fate of their friends.

Holy Diver's aim was still true, some of them were killed in an instant. Like soldiers in the Great War, going over the trenches, they were ruthlessly cut down as they tried to make a valiant charge for their friends. Fujisaki, Kuwata, Ishimaru, and Yamada all collapsed to the ground. It was almost comedic how their bodies tumbled compared to their earlier heroism.

Dio took a particular joy in driving Holy Diver's fists through the heads of the disgraced ex-Headmaster and the Ultimate Neurologist. Of all the deaths he could have subjected them to, the punishment for turning against their master, this was the kindest he'd offer. It was the same for Maizono, Oowada, Celestia, and Oogami. Scissor-blades jutted from their bodies but they still moved forward with an almost serene sense of purpose.

As their corpses fell to the ground against the flurry of strikes, easily going through their bodies and destroying their vital organs, there were even smiles on their faces as with the others.
Smiles that stayed even as their bodies turned back to nothing and their souls entered a new home in Holy Diver.

Naegi, the so-called Ultimate Hope, was reduced to falling on his knees with tears in his eyes, joined by Asahina. Hagakure was barely holding onto his platform to stay standing and Kirigiri was the same, a natural reaction to seeing her father's skull turned to nothing, denied even the final smile. Only Togami and Syo seemed to keep it together. Dio wondered if he had already won.

Had this truly been all he needed to do to secure his final victory? A simple look at the tightly-gripped fists of both Livin' On A Prayer and Naegi told him everything he needed to know.

Of course it hadn't been enough. Just as fast as Naegi had fallen, he was finding the strength to stand up again. His Stand was just behind him, eyes blazing with an almost-unnerving determination, and the signal coming from its ahoge was as strong as ever, the whole room humming from the sound of its energy.

Asahina joined Naegi and both Hagakure and Kirigiri regained their composure. It was funny. The six of them were all standing behind podiums as if it was a Class Trial again. That little mechanism Dio used to test their mental capabilities despite memory-loss had seemed so important to them before now. Maybe they didn't realise it.

As some of the the podiums lit up, a small part of Dio began to suspect that something was wrong. Whatever it was, it was enough to convince Dio to use that power to end this. The third and most powerful of Holy's Divers abilities. One that would erase the hope of the masses just as it did with those who first witnessed the true might of Holy Diver. Those who now licked at his boots with a single word.

With this, he would reveal the distance between the level of even a Stand user and Dio Brando!

"This resistance has been a nuisance, but is ultimately futile." Dio said. He spared a moment to give each of the six a glance, sizing them all up, before speaking again. "I don't know if Stands carry over to those I resurrect. Perhaps I'll learn the answer to that with the others, but not with you, Naegi."

"Dio Brando, do you deny that you have personally killed dozens, turned thousands of people into your own private cult, and destroyed the world? Do you deny that you were the Mastermind behind this whole Mutual Killing Game?" Kirigiri asked. Detective Man readied its pistol to fire on him, but Dio had no intention of playing her game.

"Livin' On A Prayer is too dangerous to allow to exist any further." Holy Diver raised its right fist at those words, an aura of black energy coating it. Dio gestured to the boy who had forced him to do this. "Behold, Naegi! The third and deadliest power of Holy Diver! Fuelled by the souls of those killed by my hand, this is a power I've only chosen to use once. The power that will turn you and Hope's Peak into nothing more than a chapter in the epic of Dio Brando. The power to overwrite not just my own reality but your own."

"You're never going to stop, are you?" Naegi asked. He seemed so downcast, as if realising that this was his end. Dio could only laugh in reply.

"Why would I? If you ever knew me, Naegi, you would know the kind of man I, Dio, am. I will be the one to rule over this world and I will use anything, and anyone, I can to become victorious and rule. Nothing will stop me from achieving my fate." Dio kept an eye on Naegi and Holy Diver
pulled its fist back for the final blow. "Say farewell to your existence, Makoto Naegi!"

This power was unlike the others. Dio required the souls of those who were slain by his hand—whether alive or resurrected—to feed this power that could delete the existence of another. Holy Diver growled as Livin' On A Prayer betrayed Naegi's fear, blasting Hope Bullet after Hope Bullet at Holy Diver, thinking that the memories of their time together would affect Dio's heart. It did nothing to make Dio hesitate.

The sound of Fujisaki's voice was more than enough.

"The Class Trial shall now reach its climax." The remaining speakers chimed. "Please vote on who the Mastermind is."

How was this possible? Dio had just killed Fujisaki. So why was his voice carrying over through the speaker system? "How did-"

"You were right to fear Fujisaki's Talent, Dio." Kirigiri said, eyeing Dio as if he was a common criminal. The memory of Fujisaki's final creation came back to Dio. "Alter Ego easily made its way through your firewalls. Matsuda did the bare minimum to begin counter-measures, enough to keep Alter Ego in a stalemate, until called into battle. That's the thing about Strong AIs, they're quite adept at defeating Weak AIs."

"This whole time, this whole battle, was simply counted as the Class Trial itself." Togami spoke as if this was already over. Like the damn Class Trial meant anything other than a method of intimidation.

"Sorry 'bout this, Dio. You're cute, but a lady like me needs a proper gentleman like my White Knight." Syo dared smile that stupid smile where her tongue just slithered there. To think he once thought of her as a potential ally.

"I knew it. I knew there was a happy ending to this." Hagakure was already blubbering. A weather-vane to the end, pointing towards wherever even the softest wind was blowing.

"Sakura gave her life for this moment. I'm not going to waste it." Asahina said, pressing down on the button. She glared at Dio as if she was a tortured mother of a murder victim, seeing the killer off to the electric chair.

Dio could only laugh at their stupidity. At their delusions. At the madness of this whole situation.

All he needed to do was send Holy Diver-faster than The Ocean, Gold, or Detective Man-over to Naegi and land the blow that would erase his existence. Without Livin' On A Prayer, their hope would be shattered in seconds. More than enough time for Dio to finally put an end to them.

The end of Hope's Peak had come.

Dio moved forward with Holy Diver, bringing Naegi into the Stand's range, and let it fly straight towards Naegi. Pressurised water bullets and golden bullets from The Ocean and Gold were easily beaten back by Holy Diver. Detective Man's Truth Bullets barely impeded the charge as Holy Diver merely touched its legs and arms and the words vanished from sight. Syo threw a scissor blade that barely cut into the back of the right hand.

Even as it grew larger enough to almost slice half of the hand off, and extended to his elbow, a single touch erased the cut without even slowing its speed.
All that stood in his way was Livin' On A Prayer now. Dio would praise Naegi for one thing. He looked death in the eye without fear.

"All of you who were forced to give everything you had for Dio's ambitions," Naegi closed his eyes before opening them again. "Don't lose hope!"

Livin' On A Prayer fired all the Hope Bullets it could at Holy Diver's chest. Maybe Naegi hoped that it would somehow remind Dio of a memory during this Killing Game, or during their time together at Hope's Peak. It was useless. Dio had come to Hope's Peak intending to break the old world, and that was just what he was going to do now.

The world seemed to slow down as Holy Diver raised its fist. It ignored the blasts from The Ocean and Gold and began to move its fist from as far back as it could be and towards Naegi. This was it. The blow that would deliver victory to Dio.

So why was it taking so long.

*What is this? Is Holy Diver moving slower?* Dio put all of his will into making Holy Diver move that bit quicker. For a moment, it shot forward at its normal speed, but then jutted to a stop. This time Holy Diver was completely immobilised, and so was Dio. *Impossible. Livin' On A Prayer can only strengthen his allies, right? How could it stop my Holy Diver? How is this even possible?*

A white-golden glow emerged from the back of Holy Diver and began to cover not only the entire back, but also the right arm of the Stand as well. The left arm had some freedom to it, but as Dio tried to aim it at Naegi, that limb became frozen in place as well. How was it that this was happening to Holy Diver?

Dio realised, just then, why Livin' On A Prayer really fired those Hope Bullets.

"Your Hope Bullets. Can they even reach those fuelling my Holy Diver?" Dio asked even as he knew the answer.

"So long as someone can feel hope, Livin' On A Prayer can reach their hearts, even if they're just a soul" Naegi looked Dio in the eye. Where had he been hiding this strength? "Alone, my Stand could never defeat yours. You were right about me. I just don't have that mind-set. Not even all our Stands together could defeat Holy Diver in battle. In raw strength and speed, it's probably unbeatable."

"But that was your mistake. You put so much faith in overwhelming us, in trying to shatter us so completely and utterly, that you kept on lending us the tools to liberate ourselves and the world." Kirigiri added.

The podiums had not been free of damage during the battle. Only in hindsight did Dio realise the care taken by his enemies in trying to keep as many intact as possible, but even then only four seemed to consistently work. The other two flickered on and off too much to be reliable.

But four was all they needed. Four was the majority vote out of the seven remaining survivors. The majority vote needed to execute the Mastermind.

Not even a second passed before the voting ended. Dio could barely hear Alter Ego announce the conclusion of the Class Trial when dealing with the rage inside of him. The idea that this whole system, designed to prove to the world that the last beacons of hope could be broken by Dio, had
completely turned against him. Every advantage he held had been turned against him somehow and was directed at him.

No. My life does not end here! I will stand over your corpses and rule this world.

"You dare try to execute Dio?" Dio screamed as he began to struggle against the invisible forces keeping him in place. It was as if every soul kept within Holy Diver was fighting to keep the Stand-and thus Dio himself-trapped in place so that the survivors could take the chance to end him. Dio would kick and fight as much as he could before letting that happen. "If you do this, you will make an enemy of every last one of my followers. The hostages I have, you'll just have to pray that my warriors decide it is better for them to live. Those who carry my banner into war, they will not stop until I am returned."

"That all may happen, but we'll face it head-on. That's what it means to be human, Dio." Naegi said. There was no sign of fear in his voice.

That only infuriated Dio more. Was this how he was going to lose it all? Him, the Ultimate Master? All of this because of a simple stroke of luck in what should have been his triumphant moment of ascension? Holy Diver was one of the most powerful Stands in the world, and it was going to lose to a Stand that could only inspire others?

Memories came back to Dio. Memories of powerlessness. The father that'd beat him bloody and blue when he lacked a bottle of cheap whiskey to drink. The agents that promised him the world but wanted his body to submit to them. The scouts who refused him Hope's Peak because he refused to debase his pride. The feeling of drowning in self-pity and alcoholism like his father.

The memory of seeing Izuru Kamukura for the first time.

Dio had attained the means of peace of mind and yet never felt so enraged. Metal chains shot out from the Execution Room and wrapped themselves around Dio's hands, feet, elbows, knees, waist, chest, and even his throat. Alter Ego was clearly doing everything it could to keep Dio restrained for his execution whilst dragging him back.

He could barely see behind him to find out which Execution the AI had planned for him. His eyes widened as he recognised the guillotine. A punishment for a fallen king, toppled by revolution. It was meant to have been Jin Kirigiri's execution and it had been. Now it was designed for Dio to take away the one thing from him that Holy Diver couldn't restore.

His life.

Holy Diver. Return to me. Dio thought fast when he made that command. He had already been dragged back, thus putting him more than 10m away from his Stand, as it dissipated from sight. A second passed, as Dio was dragged closer to the guillotine, when he willed for Holy Diver to appear next to him again. These chains would be nothing against Holy Diver's power.

A dozen golden bullets shot against Holy Diver's back.

"Don't let him escape. If you do, it's all over. We can still save the world!" Naegi commanded as Holy Diver grabbed onto the chains restraining Dio's right arm and began to pull.

Even a fraction of its force would have broken the chains. All that happened was that Holy Diver was restrained again. Only this time it was different. The souls were weak without a body to protect
them from the material world. Livin' On A Prayer was the only thing giving them the strength to fight back and yet the volley of bullets had stopped. Were they out of its range now?

Dio began to fight back with all his power. He had overcome the souls of those he killed once before, doing it again would be nothing if he simply used all of his might.

The chains began to move and position his body to the ideal position for the guillotine.

He could not give it any mind. Right now, Dio had to focus solely on breaking out of these chains. This would not be how his life would end. He would not die at the hands of Makoto Naegi! He'd kill every last one of them! Just as he did with his bastard father, just as he did with Kamukura's guards, just as he did with the Student Council, just as he did with Nanami. Just as he would do with everyone in his way!

"You think you will survive this? I will erase you from existence, Naegi. I will subject the rest of you to deaths that you wouldn't wish on the lowest of scum." Dio felt his body regain feeling. Holy Diver was slowly but surely winning the battle, even as it stood just ten metres away from Dio, and only had seconds to act. Dio refused to give his enemies the satisfaction of seeing him cry for his life. "I am Dio Brando. I am the one who brought about The World's End. I am the one who will reach Heaven."

The chains only went away just when the wooden blocks slammed over his neck and hands, Dio being too incapacitated by the souls within Holy Diver to try and escape. His head and his hands were locked in place, too far a distance from one another for Dio to use Holy Diver's effect negation himself. All he could do was keep fighting.

He was even winning! Holy Diver was taking slow and short steps, but more than enough to break the distance between Stand and user. Dio ignored the sounds of the blade above creaking and being readied to go down on his neck. Victory was still within his grasp. All he needed to do was keep struggling.

Five metres left. Now four. Holy Diver managed to stumble forward enough that its arms only needed to reach just a bit further towards Dio. All he'd need was for Holy Diver to intercept the guillotine blade and he would win. Any wounds to the neck could be healed with a single touch. If Holy Diver just made it in time.

Naegi was screaming at the top of his lungs, begging his friends to keep on fighting against Holy Diver, and was soon joined in by the rest of the survivors. So this is what it had come down to. A battle between Naegi's Hope and Dio's Power.

He couldn't lose here. Not after everything he had done to reach the very summit of his dreams. Just a single step away from total victory.

"This cannot happen to me." Dio could feel the air shift as Holy Diver struggled and flailed its arms against the golden glow that wreathed its body. He could see it fighting against the grip of dozens as it drew closer. The guillotine blade gave a loud groan as it readied to to make the drop. "I am Dio." He growled.

Two things happened at the exact same moment. The first was that the blade finally dropped and made its way towards Dio's neck. Had Dio been anything other than a human, perhaps he would have no reason to fear the decapitation that the clean and sharp blade promised him. But that was impossible. For all his power and might, Dio Brando was still a human bound by the limits of death.
It was the second event that gave Dio hope. Holy Diver threw its whole form back as if it was throwing off a great weight and indeed it was. The weight of the souls that fought so hard to keep it restrained and away from Dio had finally been lifted. The ambition and drive of Dio Brando had won again. Now all it had to do was touch Dio. Even if it didn't intercept the blades in time, there were tales that a human could survive a few seconds after losing their heads completely.

If Holy Diver could simply negate the effect of this guillotine, Dio would survive and be able to break free of this trap. Nothing would stop him from killing those who had almost killed him. The world would be his to rule over.

"I am Dio!" The Ultimate Master screamed. The blade was half-way towards his neck and Holy Diver's fingers were just inches away from making contact with Dio.

As the guillotine blade sank into Dio's neck, the fingers of Holy Diver made contact with the tips of Dio's hair.

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It's amazing how the world can change in a moment. A single second can define the entire history of the human race. Would this child survive its birth and become a beacon of hope or a bringer of despair? Would the assassin's gun make its mark? Could those who could wage war instead choose peace at a cost?

The decisions made by individuals can create and destroy worlds. There are those who say that it is the power of choice, the power to ask and act on an 'IF', that creates a world of chaos and freedom wherein the only destiny is that of which we choose. There are others who instead claim that these 'IF's exist only in the minds of humans who could not realise the pull of gravity, bringing them towards their Fate.

As the eyes of the world watched the battle between the last beacons of hope for the world they once knew, and the man who had destroyed it all for the sake of his ambitions and dreams, all knew that this very moment would determine everything. That this was the moment in which worlds were born or destroyed.

Would Dio Brando, the Ultimate Master, truly survive this final trap? Had Holy Diver reached his body in time to negate the effect of the guillotine's blade?

Two worlds could be born from this moment. One world would see the blade cut down, the head fall from the body, only to then be pulled up again and attach itself to his body. The chains and guillotine would be shattered into splinters and shards and nothing would stop his wrath. The survivors would fight bravely and with hope, even as Makoto Naegi was erased from existence, but it would be useless.

The world would fall into despair, and Dio Brando would create his Kingdom at last.

But there was the other world. The world where Holy Diver would not reach its master in time. Where the guillotine cut through Dio's neck and his life would end in an instant. The survivors of Class 78, who had fought so hard and bitterly, would have triumphed.

Hope would have been sparked in the hearts of millions as the man whose name monsters in human skin burnt the world had finally perished.
In that very moment, the split-second before all of humanity would know if Dio Brando was dead or alive, there were those who just watched.

Those beacons of hope who Dio had corrupted into his hounds of war watched with horror. The man who they venerated as a God had been proven to bleed by these infidels who dared rise up against him! Now there was a chance he was going to die? It was unthinkable. Unimaginable. They felt a despair far beyond anything they had felt before, one too poisonous for even their warped minds to take pleasure in.

Five Warriors of Hope prayed that the man who saved them from the Demons would overcome these monsters yet again. That he would bring them to the Heaven he promised them, where there was peace of mind and safety from the monsters that hurt them. Surely Dio could overcome these Demons, right?

The Future Foundation, the last remnants of those who championed the ideals of Hope's Peak and the old world, watched in anticipation. They had known of Stands. It had been one of the reasons that Ultimate Despair had driven them to the brink of defeat. The tale of the power of the Arrows, and how they were stolen from Hope's Peak by Dio, was known amongst its leaders.

They watched and prayed that the Stands of the survivors had been enough. That this final reversal of fortunes would be enough to end Dio Brando. If not, then it was over. He broke the only Stand Arrow that the side of hope had access to, if only for a handful of minutes. Yet that might not mattered. If Class 78 would triumph, right here and now, then Hope would win the day. Maybe even win the war

There were others, part of the groups yet different from them, who watched with their own thoughts. The zealot who prayed for the creation of the Ultimate Hope. The failed Messiah who yearned to see who would win the battle. The corrupted teacher who thirsted for the victory of her master. The fighter who wanted to see the bastard who blackmailed him die a miserable death, no matter how much he hated the Luckster for his courage.

The Friend who watched, tightly grabbing into the sides of the television in his room, mentally begging for the one who saved him to live on. For Dio to lead him, and the world, to the future they envisioned for humanity.

The moment passed and the blade sliced through Dio's head. The head fell from the guillotine and landed on the floor with a thump. His body went limp and mankind drew in a breath to discover what would happen next. Would the head return to the body? Was this all a cruel trick to torment them?

Five seconds passed and the world experienced hope for the first time since the Tragedy.

Dio Brando/Holy Diver: Dead
**Holy Diver**
**User: Dio Brando**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power A
- Speed A
- Range C
- Durability A
- Precision B
- Developmental Potential B

**Abilities**
User can nullify effect on self. Only activates via physical contact by the hands of user or Holy Diver.

Resurrection of the dead as servants. Appearance and name must be known to the user. Strength and willingness to obey relative to knowledge of the resurrected, however, those resurrected can break free of control if given sufficient emotional stimuli or physical trauma. Resurrection cannot be cancelled once done and user must either kill those brought back, or kill themselves, to cancel the effect.

This ability requires sufficient soul energy from those killed by the user or Holy Diver themselves. Can 'overwrite' reality to cancel the existence of whoever is struck by Holy Diver's fists. This does not erase them from the past and a single use of this ability requires large amounts of energy.

**Detective Man**
**User: Kirigiri Kyouko**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power B
- Speed B
- Range A
- Durability C
- Precision B
- Developmental Potential C

**Abilities**
Catalogues facts known on an area and/or person. These facts can be used as shields, or 'truth bullets' that cause harm relative to the knowledge of that truth or the secrecy of that truth. If affected makes a claim that contradicts a fact, the user can deploy a 'truth bullet' that causes harm relative to a punch and/or kick.

Can add weight to lies spoken. If someone knowingly lies about a fact, their words become a physical object that pierces through the body and restricts movement. This does not cause actual physical harm. Only prevents movement until confession of falsehood.

Can track 'Partners' and 'Suspects' via blue and red tags respectively. Detective Man can track both down from a range of 100m.
The Ocean
User: Aoi Asahina
Stats
Destructive Power B
Speed B
Range C
Durability C
Precision C
Developmental Potential C

Abilities
Stand alters area within range to have properties similar to water. Those within range can still breathe as if outside of water and are not inside actual water but physical forces resemble water. Effect can only be cancelled by user themselves or by exiting range of Stand.

User is capable of summoning water which can be manipulated in various ways.

Gold
User: Byakuya Togami
Stats
Destructive Power B
Speed C
Range C
Durability B
Precision B
Developmental Potential C

Abilities
User can surround self with gold to act as armour. In this state, damage to the Stand does not harm the user but does expose their body parts to attack.

User can use gold as shield or offensive weapon. Gold does gradually decline in quality and strength when the user is further away from it, eventually degrading into fool's gold, and manipulation of shape only possible when within 10m of user.

User can use Gold to become an identical decoy. Does not change weight, does not speak unless explicitly commanded to by user, and incapable of taking independent action beyond prior instruction unless user is within contact. Copy begins to deteriorate when user is more than 50m away from Stand.

Smells Like Teenage Spirit
User: Touko Fukawa
Stats
Destructive Power E-A
Speed B
Range B
Durability D
Precision A
Developmental Potential E-A

Abilities
Intensity of wounds from stab and/or cuts dealt by user can be determined by strength of feeling from a range of 0-100%. If the user feels nothing for the affected then wound severity will not change. If the user has strong feelings of hate/love for the target then the injury grows relative to that feeling and the severity increases. At a high enough 'feeling', the affected will be covered in wounds of ranging depth and length of incisions and perish from injuries.

User may possibly manipulate location of scars on target, if high-enough level of attachment whether love or hate.

**In The Year 2525**

**User: Yasuhiro Hagakure**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power E
- Speed C
- Range E
- Durability E
- Precision C
- Developmental Potential D

**Abilities**

Stand takes the form of a cloud that requires an object to reside in. Is capable of minor movements, primarily following the user, and can block vision but requires another object to reside in for second ability.

Stand is capable of revealing path of Fate. Requires specific questions to reveal images of future. User has no control on what images are seen, has no way of discerning meaning, and no context is given. Stand offers image from ten seconds to ten years in the future. Image clarity dependent on transparency of where Stand is residing.
Hajime Hinata was tired.

He was tired of fighting. Tired of choices. Tired of thinking.

He had seen what was meant to be a school trip turn into a sick Mutual Killing Game run by some demonic being that tormented their 'teacher', had to argue for why this and that person who he trusted were killers of other friends, and it all turned out to be a simulation designed to cure them of Despair. Made to free them from the control of a monster who made them destroy the world, only for a fragment of his self to hijack the entire system.

Everything that Hinata and his friends fought for, trying to find some justice for the deaths of those who had been killed, had all led up to this moment. The moment of victory, he could say. It was a pretty funny joke, if you were into black comedy.

Comedy so black it might as well be called tragedy.

Why did it have to be them who had to decide? To make the decision over whether to doom the world or destroy themselves utterly?

If they chose to shut-down the Neo-World Program, Hinata would cease to exist and the others would go back to being Ultimate Despair. If they chose to Graduate like Dio said, they'd be letting his Alter Ego run loose on the world. Their friends would be robbed from them forever as they became nothing more than human skin-suits for him to use however he liked.

So was it wrong to just Repeat? To live the school-life they had been promised by Usami on that island forever? To be free of the murdering and death of the outside world?

It wasn't like Dio was going to win. For all his mockery of those three from the Future Foundation, he was pretty upset about the thought of being trapped here forever with them. Or maybe he just didn't like Hinata, or rather he just didn't like who Hinata was before all of this.

It wasn't fair. Why did Hinata have to be the one who had to decide between existence and non-existence? Who wouldn't react the way he did, learning that he was just last remnants of a mind ripped apart and re-moulded into an artificial Ultimate Hope like Izuru Kamukura? From what Dio had said, it wasn't like Kamukura was anything impressive in the end. Just nothing but Talent and Stand Power.

*Stands. What even are those?* Hinata thought to himself. Not out of confusion, but simply
exhaustion. Dio had made it clear that they were some kind of crazy power that Ultimate Despair, and now the Future Foundation, could wield in their fight against one another. Abilities that could shape the world around them without blinking.

It made sense that Hinata would have a Stand that just mentioning would be enough to cause all sides to hesitate.

"Hinata...the Stand that your body wields is..." Naegi paused in hesitation. What? What was wrong with his Stand?

"It's nothing more than a leech. A perfect example of what Hope's Peak turned you into." Dio's Alter Ego madly grinned from behind the monitor. Behind him, a massive Murralsee gazed down on the eight of them with a dark red gleam. "They took someone who wished to become talent and cursed him with the total destruction of his identity. Nothing more than a tool for their own control. They ruined a Stand Arrow trying to discover ultimate power and ruined another trying to create the perfect being in yourself."

The perfect being. Hinata supposed if a person could do anything and everything, that'd be a pretty good description of them. Absolute perfection. No flaws, no mistakes, no humanity, no soul, just perfection. That was what awaited him if he decided to activate the shut-down protocol.

Then Hajime Hinata would be no more, Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu, Akane Owari, Sonia Nevermind, and Kazuichi Souda would all go back to being Dio's slaves and the others would spend eternity in a coma. If the Future Foundation didn't decide to exterminate every last one of them and keep them down for good. But, hey, at least Naegi, Kirigiri, and Togami (but not Togami? Or was the other Togami not Togami?) would be freed.

At least Dio would be dead.

"Do you understand how much damage he did before his death?" Togami snapped, apparently the 'real' one. "You don't remember what Holy Diver is capable of. I've seen it. I've seen what someone like him can do with its abilities. Now imagine ten of him running around, each with their own unique Stands, causing trouble all over the world."

"If Dio's Alter Ego escapes here, the world will be plunged into chaos." Kirigiri added. "He will not rest until all of us are heads on spikes, and that's if he's being merciful. Then he will take over the world. You cannot let him do that."

"It is no more than what is owed to I, Dio," Dio growled and slammed his virtual fists against the monitor, as if trying to break it himself. That starved and vengeful look in his eyes unnerved Hinata. "You could have avenged my death that day. You could have slaughtered the Future Foundation before they found my killers. But no. You were all too busy getting high on your own misery. You had the nerve to even disrespect my body!"

"W-What's he talking about?" Souda looked to the three Future Foundations members. None of them were looking them in the eye anymore.

"W-What's he talking about?" Souda looked to the three Future Foundations members. None of them were looking them in the eye anymore.

Why would they? How could you look someone in the eye and talk about how you tore apart a decapitated body and took parts of it for your own, ripping out your own flesh and limbs to make room? An eye for Fuyuhiko, a hand for Komaeda, and what Mikan had taken might have made Hinata throw up once. It even did at the time.
Now he simply accepted it for what it was. Another step in the long and tragic road that they could not break from. As Ultimate Despair, every last one of them had accepted being nothing more than extension's of Dio Brando's will, to the point where they all agreed to kill themselves in a simulation to ensure that some part of Dio would live on within them.

Dio, at least the AI version of him, either took some sick joy over describing all the horrors they did in his name, or merely just wanted to make them willing to select Graduate and be cursed with a moral compass after dooming the world. He made it clear that if the Future Foundation didn't flee Jabberwock Island when everyone woke up, they wouldn't last long.

But wasn't it the same if they decided to shut-down the sequence? Kamukura and Ultimate Despair went into the simulation thinking that it'd create a legion of Dios from them. What were they going to think when it turned out that their Avatars turned on them with advice from the Future Foundation? That no piece of Dio's conscious mind remained?

They'd tear the Future Foundation apart and fight the war even harder. Maybe even decide to do something similar to what Dio wanted them to do. Or more what he would have wanted months ago.

What he wanted now; that he made clear.

"Your efforts are useless, Naegi." Dio scoffed. Hinata almost felt sorry for the guy, eyes wide and a tight grip on the podium, begging them to not lose hope. It didn't change a thing. "They know what they must do. They must do as they have done with everything else they have. Ultimate Despair, you have given Dio everything. You gave your hopes. You gave your dreams. You gave your loved ones. Now you will give your souls! You've already given away your bodies, now give me ownership of those who have sinned and let me be re-born again! It was their destinies to die so that Dio could live!"

They had given him their bodies. Not Hinata. Dio rejected that thought as if he had been asked if he slept with an animal. The others? They were fair-game, juicy conquests for Dio to savour in his calmer moments, Hinata imagined. From Hiyoko to Nekomaru, he took them all.

It was funny again. The things that might have made Hinata disgusted or sick just caught his attention now.

Maybe I'm becoming like Kamukura. Hinata thought to himself. It'd fit the mood of this place.

Chiaki had been right to pull him out. He just couldn't live on in the endlessly repeating paradise. To look in the faces of those who were killed and who survived and simply pretend that they weren't just running and hiding away from their fates. He wouldn't make a choice and he wouldn't face up to the consequences. Dio was right to hold someone like him in contempt.

Where was he now? An infinite black void from which there were only a handful of bright white lights that shined bright enough that Hinata could still look at himself. Still able to see the 'body' that Kamukura remembered enough of to form a shape for the simulation. Maybe it wasn't even his body. This might have just been what Kamukura thought he looked like before.

Just some average mediocrity so desperate to be important that he let Hope's Peak turn him into a tool. Hinata didn't like to think about the implications of that. He didn't want to think of anything anymore.

Something shimmered in the distance. Hinata tried to get a closer look but all he could see were a
thousand tiny blinding lights shining into his eyes. It was as if you tried to look at a briefcase full of shining diamonds only for them to catch the sun's light and all of them reflected right into your eyes.

As it came closer, the lights dimmed and Hinata's eyes adjusted to what he was seeing. The strange being that had somehow invaded the void inside which Hinata waited for nothing. At first, he had expected it to be Chiaki. She was an AI, after all, and had been the one who helped pluck him out of the repeating fantasy he had tried to fit into.

But no. It couldn't be Chiaki. Maybe she was never truly human, but she at least looked the part. You could touch her and feel skin on skin contact. You could gaze upon her and find the image of what an Ultimate Gamer would look like, even if it challenged the common stereotype. Not the thing that stood before his eyes, hovering in emptiness just as Hinata was.

It had a humanoid shape, he'd give it that, but there was only one colour in its eyes and it was blood-red, holding target-radar inside them that gazed at Hinata. It was about the same height as him and simply stood there and watched him. Hinata raised a hand and the being before him raised its own. It was like watching his reflection in the mirror.

That was what the being was. It didn't have skin, but instead a continuous pane of glass that went from the top of its head to the tips of its toes, gleaming under only white lights in eternity. It might have been beautiful if the glass wasn't cracked all over.

Hinata didn't know how else to say it. Just as every bit of the figure was glass, nearly every part of it had a crack in the glass that made it look like it was in the mid-point between a crack gathering and the glass shattering to bits. Yet the glass never shattered. Maybe time was frozen in this realm, but Hinata somehow knew that that was irrelevant.

_You're never going to shatter. That's not what you were meant for, is it?_ Hinata gazed into the millions tiny mirrors that made up the Stand. _So you're Boulevard of Broken Dreams._

The Ultimate Stand, as Dio mockingly called it. Hinata had expected Dio to be someone who was impressed by power and respected it, but he showed none of it to either the concept of Izuru Kamukura, nor did he care much for Boulevard of Broken Dreams either. Jealously? Disgust at the sight of the Stand itself?

"You're it, aren't you?" Hinata asked. He knew the answer, it was more a way of testing what the Stand did in response. "How are you even here? I thought Stands couldn't go into the Neo-World Program."

Naegi had said it was why he hadn't used his own. Dio had mocked him for that. The Ultimate Hope unable to use his greatest weapon to make Ultimate Despair sacrifice themselves for the good of the world. Naegi had instantly denied that he'd use 'Livin' On A Prayer' that way, but a part of Hinata wondered if that was actually the plan. Fill them with hope so they'd do the Future Foundation's dirty-work for them.

Maybe this place was inside his own mind. A final retreat after the continuous beach-side couldn't satisfy his needs, after Chiaki had pulled him out with the reminder that this wasn't a game. Where was she now? He'd welcome her over this reminder of what he had become in the real world.

Boulevard of Broken Dreams didn't reply to him. Hinata began to wonder how it would even communicate in the first place. It wasn't like he knew sign language and the Stand didn't have a mouth on it. Unless you counted the glass-cracks along where its mouth would be, but those cracks
were the same as the others all over the thing.

The supposedly most powerful Stand in the world and it was the softest touch away from shattering into a million pieces. Hinata was starting to know the feeling himself.

"What should I do?" He asked again, as if an answer would appear for him. "If we shut-down the program, I'll disappear forever, and the others will become Ultimate Despair. If we graduate, everyone who died here will become Dio Brando, and the world will be destroyed. So isn't it better to live in an endless cycle? Even if the Future Foundation are trapped, so is Dio."

But what would that mean? Everyone already thought that Dio Brando was dead and gone. If people like Naegi, Kirigiri, and Togami were trapped in with Ultimate Despair and Dio, though, what would that mean for the world? Would the disappearance hurt the Future Foundation and fuel a new Ultimate Despair? Dio's army had some remnants, according to both the Alter Ego and Naegi, so maybe they'd act.

Maybe they were simply waiting for Ultimate Despair to return first.

The war ending in an eternal stalemate. Just as it was inside the simulation itself.

Only there was no option to simply loop through an infinite number of comfy island adventures like Hinata could. The people of the world outside had to live with his choices just as much as he and the others had to. An eternal stalemate would just bring endless suffering as Dio's minions would probably just run rampant, and it would all be Hinata's fault.

But it wasn't his fault! It's not like he was the one who ended the world. Why should he have to disappear forever because of the sins of Dio Brando and Izuru Kamukura?

*I never asked for any of this! I just wanted to be special.* That had been why he signed up for the Izuru Kamukura Project, wasn't it? Someone like him who had no talent whatsoever, who was no more than a drop in the ocean, could become the Ultimate Hope. Was that a crime worth being deleted from existence?

Boulevard didn't react for a few moments. It then raised its right hand and began to tap its index finger against the side of its skull, producing a soft clinking noise that rang through the darkness and light. Hinata almost flinched, thinking that the glass would break, when he realised that the Stand was intact as ever.

The fractured glass was a lie. A million mirrors reflected Hinata's image as Boulevard's entire body shifted to extend its left hand towards him, as if offering to lead him somewhere.

Taking its hand into his own felt strange. He knew not to expect skin but the feel of the glass was different to how it looked. The feel of a hundred lines interconnecting with each other, each one with its own twists and turns, in just the hand alone took Hinata by surprise. Memories of being warned about touching broken glass meant nothing when Hinata's fingers run along the splits in glass and were untouched in turn.

Boulevard shattered. Hinata's skin was again unblemished, even as the hand he held turned into nothing but shards, but the sight and sound of seeing this glass mirror of himself break and shatter into nothing took him aback. The glass shards made it worse as they didn't move in place after Boulevard's destruction, merely standing in mid-air, reflecting the white lights surrounding Hinata again and again.
The light soon became too much and Hinata felt as if he was falling. Not falling down-he doubted there was a ground in this place-but forwards.

*Hinata was standing over a giant spherical shaped room, but was also laying down in that room. A strangely-shaped containment pod seemed to hold him inside even as he stood in the sky and looked down on the scene. Scientists of some kind were gazing over his body, as it struggled and fought against the restraints on the hands and feet. There was glass where his skin should be? Why? Why wasn't anyone doing anything? Why were they just letting him suffer? Hinata asked these questions even when he knew exactly why Hope's Peak were doing nothing to save their lab-rat.

"The subject has proven difficult in terms of responding to the imitation-microbes." One of the scientists said, sighing to himself the way any scientist would at a disappointing experiment."Not enough mental strength. Distress over Talent-infusion treatment likely. We'll have to delete everything about him. Even the slightest fragments are making him resist further experimentation."

The others nodded, before another one-this one distinctive by their blue hair- stepped forward. He spoke loudly to be heard over Hinata's screams. "It's more than that. The subject is average. Mediocre. Stands are like Talent; they need the exceptional. It can't just be the mental characteristics we alter. The physical aspect must be amended as well, if the bacteria reports are correct, even at the cost of the current subject."

"These people don't grow on trees, Shingetsu. Getting this one was hard enough. Still, don't worry about this precious experiment, I'll handle the memories." The scientists were demure in this person's lead. The screaming Hinata recognised him as the Ultimate Neurologist. The one whose research made all this possible. He spoke dismissively of everyone, but wouldn't get in the way of the Project."Let's not waste another goddamn Arrow on this. First try only."

Hinata saw a flash of light and then he witnessed just what they meant. The subject that had once been Hajime Hinata was thankfully unconscious during this procedure, but the last pieces of that existence had to instead watch as the scientists cut him open and removed what they saw as clutter. His appendix was ripped out from him to make room for what they needed to put inside him.

*It merged into his body fine enough. All they really needed was to keep the pattern on the thing intact and it would work its magic. For someone like Hinata, especially robbed of what made him who he was, this was probably the only way to get a Stand out of him. The only way for Izuru Kamukura to truly be the Ultimate Hope was for him to master all humanity's possibilities.

All they needed to do was destroy everything human about him.

*Hinata was just watching his own death, but the birth of Boulevard of Broken Dreams. Another flash and he saw the figure of fractured glass emerge for the first time, slowly seeping out of Kamukura's body as the Ultimate Hope left the containment pod and opened his eyes for the first time. Green was replaced with red, as those same eyes turned to Yasuke Matsuda.

*She Blinded Me With Science emerged behind Matsuda and was caught within the reflections of Boulevard of Broken Dreams. The glass shimmered with a dozen colours that Hinata could barely see and where Boulevard once stood, there was now another She Blinded Me With Science. The two female-looking Stands gazed into each other's eyes, one almost perfectly mimicking the movements of the other.*
Matsuda reported back to the Steering Committee-incapable of having Stands of their own to see this—and both Kamukura and Hinata heard the sounds of applause from behind the glass. After so long, they finally had Hope that they could control on a whim.

Hinata felt another flash of light and reminded himself of what truly happened. It was a small comfort that the people who had ended him would only just a hollow husk of a person in return. All the Talents in the world, and the power to seize the power of any Stand, and it all lied in a creature that could never inspire Hope.

Days, maybe even weeks, passed for Kamukura before Hinata finally saw a change. A man leaning on the doorway, danger surrounding his very being, was looking at Kamukura with false eyes. To anyone looking, possible the bloodied and bruised man in a suit, held by a single hand, those eyes were containing mockery. A child laughing at another's stupidity.

Hinata, and Kamukura, knew better. They could see where that contempt truly came from. It was not someone mocking a lesser, but a man hating another for having something he yearned for his own.

"Do you even hate them for what they've done to you?" Dio Brando smirked as he took another step forward. Hinata wondered if Kamukura would understand him if he tried to tell him to attack Dio. "All that power. All that potential. Wasted on a lobotomised monkey who can only imitate the acts of humans. To think that this is what was meant to be the Ultimate Hope."

The man in his hand sputtered and grabbed onto Dio's shirt. He truly thought this wouldn't end in his death, if he simply begged enough. "You see? I showed you what you wanted. I got you in here. Now can we ple-"

Dio lifted the man in his hand up slightly and grabbed his throat with his other hand. It was no task for Dio to break his neck in two, especially when Hinata found himself sinking through the man's body when he tried to intercept. Hinata was lost to panic, screaming at Kamukura on why he just sat there and did nothing. But he then realised why.

What would be the point?

Kamukura knew everything and could do everything. There was no ceiling he could not break. So why even bother? Boredom defined his life and swallowed everything else whole. If someone like Dio was offering him a world where he could shatter the pre-determined harmony that bound him on his path, if there was salvation for him, then why not? It wasn't like he'd be able to escape his Fate himself.

All it meant was giving Dio the three remaining Stand Arrows of Hope's Peak, and assisting in destroying the world.

Hinata tried to reach through to Izuru and found nothing. Another flash, even as the origin couldn't be found, and Hinata was once again watching Dio and Izuru, only this time the former had a Stand of his own. Boulevard wasn't out. Hinata somehow knew that it coming out was something Dio forbade and Kamukura went along with it.

He didn't know what happened to those Arrows. If the Future Foundation had Stands of their own, they might have found one of them, but the fate of the other two had been kept away from Kamukura's mind. He doubted that Dio trusted that secret with any member of Ultimate Despair.
This flash was larger than the other, more than enough for Hinata to be blind and instead relying on his ears and the memories shooting into his mind. That was a funny word for it. Memories. As if having someone else's mind jammed into his own was somehow a normal experience.

Kamukura had been summoned to accompany Dio to the outside of Hope’s Peak. The security guards were quick to die, Hinata long-since realising that he could no more interfere than an audience member could in a cinema, and the two strongest men on the planet looked ahead at the building. It was clear why Izuru had been brought out and it was not for his fighting abilities.

The Talent of the Ultimate Make-Up Artist had been useful in changing Dio’s look. No one knew who Kamukura truly was and those who did wouldn’t be able to put two and two together until it would be too late. For now, Dio Brando looked like a more muscular version of Izuru Kamukura. It was a look that Dio had not been impressed by.

“To look so pitiful. It’s quite the Talent you were given.” Dio said. He turned a disdainful eye to Kamukura. “Stay out camera-sight and move in where I tell you. Can you follow that simple command?”

If he thought it would make Izuru angry, he was mistaken. Kamukura simply didn't care.

Nor did he care when he watched Dio Brando slaughter the Student Council of Hope’s Peak using Holy Diver, the Stand appearing an exact copy of Murralsee, everyone’s tormentor in this whole Mutual Killing Game. The Student Council did their best with the weapons they were given, and the slight head-start in running, but it was useless. It was impossible to defeat a Stand like Holy Diver.

The sight of Hope’s Peak Academy’s pet Ultimate Hope going rogue and slaughtering the Student Council, and this whole tragedy financed by the eye-watering payments of the Reserve Course, only made the brainwashing that much stronger. Those tics who tried to suck out what important and talent they could from the Main Course began to swarm the gates and demand blood.

Dio naturally revelled in it. The power to negate effect and raise the dead pleased someone like him. Now he also had an army of two-thousand to do with as he wished.

All of this had merely been still-images to Hinata. As if he was watching photographs in a presentation and being told the context to them. What was the point of all this? How was this meant to give him answers on what to do? Was Boulevard of Broken Dreams torturing him now?

It wasn't fair! This wasn't Hinata's fault. Izuru Kamukura should have done something to stop Dio. Dio was the one doing the killing and destruction. Hope's Peak shouldn't have tried to create a God from a human!

That was when he saw Chiaki.

It wasn't the Chiaki he knew. There was no black blazer but a light brown one, at least that must have been how it looked before it was cut to shreds and stained with blood. One of her eyes was swelled shut, her right leg was bleeding too much to not be fatal. It was as if she had been jumped in an alley, or mauled apart by a wild animal. Every step made her wince in agony and she had to lean against a wall to keep making her way towards a door. A choir of wailing voices waited behind that door.

And Kamukura was just watching.
Hinata tried to scream at Izuru to do something. Anything! He was meant to be the Ultimate Hope. Even if he couldn't inspire even the slightest bit of it, he still had all the Talents in the world, didn't he? Mikan was the Ultimate Nurse and Hinata was damn sure that her Talent was passed on into Kamukura. He could stop the bleeding. He could still save Chiaki.

"Do something, you piece of trash!" Hinata wanted to scream.

No sound came from his lips, even as Chiaki stumbled to her knees, yelping in pain. Kamukura stood and watched as she tried to summon the strength to keep moving.

"I want to help my friends...I want to save Ms. Yukizome...they say if you try, you can do it." She mumbled out, using the wall as leverage. Hinata rushed to put his arms under her to assist.

It had to mean something. Boulevard of Broken Dreams wouldn't have just sent him here just to watch Chiaki die in the real world, would it?

Kamukura merely stood and watched as Chiaki Nanami began to slowly make her way to the door again. Why was she doing this? How was she even standing after those injuries? Did she really think she'd make it out after the knife to the kidney? Even if she somehow got her classmates away from Dio, she'd drown in her own blood before she made it to the surface, let alone a hospital.

He could save her, but what would be the point? Dio would just kill her anyway. He was resting right there, just by the edge of the door, where Holy Diver would land the final blow on her.

Yet he kept on watching. She had his interest.

Hinata tried to punch Kamukura in the face (What would be the point? He'd just kill her anyway? How could he just stand there and think that?) and the fist just phased through. He hoped Boulevard was laughing it right, wherever the Stand was.

Chiaki made it to the door and had to lean on the handle, almost slipping off due to the blood in her hand. A pathetic attempt to stem the bleeding. "I don't want to die...I want more memories with my friends." Chiaki whimpered her words through the tears. Hinata could barely hear the sound of the doorknob being turned over his own silent screams, seeing her turn her head towards Kamukura, tears seeping down her face even as she began to push forward. "I want to play games with everyone again. I want to play with you again, Hinata."

She opened the door with a resolution that took even Hinata aback. This wasn't accepting her fate. This was her trying to forge her own.

The reward was that the last thing she ever did was go from determination to pain-soaked horror as the right fist of Holy Diver, shrouded in black mist, slammed against her chest and made it half-way through her body. Her feet were swept off the ground as she was briefly lifted up high before the very fabric of reality around her twisted and turned in a spiral motion and her body as surrounded by shining lights.

What did he do to her? Where had her body gone? Hinata asked those questions when the answer came to him the second it did to Kamukura. Dio Brando had used Holy Diver in a way neither of them could have imagined.

Chiaki Nanami had not just been killed. She had been erased from existence itself.
Hinata fell to the ground and slammed his fist on the ground. There was no pain, for he never truly hit the ground, and thus no impact. No matter how hard he tried, Hinata's fist felt nothing even as he smashed the ground a dozen times. Behind him, Izuru Kamukura's face was drenched in a steady flow of tears. The Hajime Hinata that Chiaki had insisted lived on in him was doing the same thing that Hinata was doing now. Hating Kamukura and themselves for doing nothing for their friend.

Ahead of Hinata was the sound of the people he had been through so much with falling into despair. Their minds warped by the brainwashing and the sight of their friend being erased from reality, they had been broken by Dio's power and were clay for him to do as he wished with. He walked forward without even the slightest hesitation, there was almost a spring in his step, when he stopped next to Kamukura.

"So you even imitate tears." He said. Kamukura did nothing while Dio began to walk again, only taking the effort to turn his head back to Kamukura. "This has been a long day. I'm taking a break. Make sure no one kills themselves."

Kamukura barely listened to Dio. His attention was focused on the tiny fashion-accessory that had fallen onto the floor and escaped Dio's attention. When someone took another step towards becoming humanity's new God, who would give mind to some pathetic little hair-clip like the Space-Invaders one that had shot from her hair due to the impact of Holy Diver's blow.

The last thing Hinata saw of that was Kamukura kneeling to pick it up.

Another flash and he saw the bodies of his friends laying on the floor. Hinata stepped forward to do something before remembering how this torture worked. It was enough for him to realise that all fourteen bodies before him weren't just moaning in pain, but also in pleasure.

All of their Stands were known to him now. Boulevard of Broken Dreams had seen each and everyone of them with its glass skin and could summon their powers when needed. Dio maintained his rule of forbidding Kamukura to watch them 'train', however, in case Holy Diver was ever witnessed.

As if he thought Kamukura had done nothing when he murdered Chiaki. Izuru toyed with the hair-clip in his pocket, looking over the room now that the fight had ended.

"Holy Diver...to think it's so powerful." Fuyuko muttered, blood dripping from a cut on his forehead over one of his eyes. By the looks of Beat It, black sun-glasses smashed to bits and its red jacket stained with blood, the wound came from his Stand. He had enough energy to dismissively kick Peko who laid near right leg. "Made you look like a piece of shit, Tool."

"That's Lord Dio for us." Sonia said, eyes gazing up towards Dio as if he were a legend instead of a man. There was a hunger and lust in her eyes that unnerved Hinata just as much as her words did. "He's the God of War."

"He's God of all." Mikan added. How else would she describe her 'beloved'? The only one in the group whose eyes were filled with an even greater euphoria was Komaeda.

"Such despair is running through my veins." Komaeda let the drool run down the side of his mouth alongside the blood. He wrapped his arms around his chest not only out of pain, but out of happiness too. "Ah, what a shining hope I'll feel when he's defeated."

That caused the others to turn on him. It was almost pathetic how, even as the others swarmed
Komaeda's body to strike him further down, ignoring their own wounds, Dio simply sat and smiled to himself. They were barely on his mind as opposed to the thoughts of glory and power that awaited him. He didn't even care to notice the contempt in which Kamukura held him in now.

It wasn't like he would do anything about it. What would be the point of fighting Fate?

Hinata felt his whole body move backwards. He somehow knew that he was nearing the end of this trip down memory-lane, for whatever reason that he'd been thrown into it in the first place, but not before the last few sights came to him.

He saw Sonia's Ballroom Blitz attracts dozens towards her, clawing and beating one another to be the first towards her, only for the first to touch her to be destroyed utterly by the power of those who fought. Gundham's Welcome To The Jungle rallying dozens of predators to swarm on the men, woman, and children trying to flee this nightmare. Kazuichi's Welcome to the Machine sending people flying into the sky as their limbs were tinkered and toyed with.

Akane's Eye of the Tiger giving her the strength to slam her fists and legs against swords and guns. Fuyuhiko's Beat It and Peko's Killing Machine created a horrifying combination, Peko's sword came a forest of blades that skewered those in its path, and Fuyuhiko could turn even the smallest cut into something deadly. Nekomaru's You're The Best was driving them even further, electrifying anyone who came close to them, and making the others that much stronger.

Mikan's Voodoo saw her stab herself in the neck a dozen times and the 'patient' died within agonising seconds. Hiyoko forcibly led dozens with her Safety Dance, none of them able to protect their ears against Ibuki's Feel The Noize, dying on their feet as pink liquid seeped from their ears. The stragglers that remained were lucky if they avoided Mahiru's Into The Lens. Those that weren't didn't last long in the world of her camera.

Teruteru took a sick enjoyment in using Adam's Apple. The starving masses who needed to eat were instead treated to what seemed like perfect banquets, until the food turned poisonous just before it reached their lips. Komaeda was content with serving those kids. Hinata tried to find out more, but Kamukura had only ever observed them. None of them knew who he was, not after their memories were deleted.

All over the world, Ultimate Despair killed and tortured millions. The Future Foundation did their best to fight against them but even the finest of humans could do little against such overwhelming Stand Power. It was only their own sadism and Dio's ego that was keeping the world stable. No one could stop them. Kamukura simply stood back and looked on, as if that was all he could do.

Hinata was left to silently scream until he could feel noise return and he was back in darkness.

Boulevard of Broken Dreams was gone. Not even the glass shards that was once the remnants of its form remained. It was just Hinata kneeling in the abyss, weeping for what he and the others had done, all because of Dio's work and his own weakness.

Arms wrapped around him from behind. "I'm sorry you're upset right now, Hinata." A soft, almost but never robotic voice said, holding him close. "I know you didn't want this."

"He destroyed you, Chiaki." Hinata said, through the tears. "Erased you from existence. Now we have to do it all over again to save the world. We won't even have memories of you this time." He forced himself to regain control of his emotions. He had to stop the tears right now, if only to face the facts. "It'll be like you never even existed."
"Dio would probably think that," Chiaki admitted, only to hold him tighter. "I don't. I don't just exist in memories, or in actions, but in you guys. Even if you forget me, or even just don't think of me. If you just live in the future, that's all I'll need to exist."

"You can exist if we keep on repeating." Hinata was beginning to wonder if that was so bad anymore.

Dio would be trapped forever, bound by the plans of the minds he warped. That was justice, in a way. Everyone else could simply enjoy the lives they deserved together, free from having to think of what they did to the world and to themselves in service of Dio.

"That's living in the present moment. Never trying to escape the comfort zone and never asking difficult questions. So scared of the dark that you won't even leave your home." Chiaki replied, almost scolding in her tone. She removed her arms and turned Hinata around. The two of them looked each other in the eyes for the first time since her execution. "If you choose to Graduate, you're choosing to live in the past. Giving away your friends to Dio in exchange for being able to pretend you were never Ultimate Despair."

"So what? We should just live on as a legacy, forgotten even by ourselves? Be protected by the people we tried to betray?" Hinata left out the obvious last question. Should he just erase himself?

"Who said that'd happen? Dio?" Chiaki asked. Her expression hadn't changed, but there was a new steel in her voice. One that made Hinata tense up and listen even further. "Do you know how Dio Brando makes himself feel strong? He tears people down so that they'll either lay there and die or worship him. That's what he did to everyone. He broke them so that he could use them. I think you're actually strong. Not just wanting to look strong, but showing real strength. You showed that on the island."

How? All he did was make friends and help find killers. The Class Trials didn't even matter, they were only some kind of cosmic method of picking straws on whose body got to go to Dio and who could sacrifice their loyalty to the bastard. It wasn't as if they meant anything in the end.

It wasn't as if his efforts mattered.

"They did matter. They still do." Chiaki's words were enough to throw Hinata out of his self-pity through shock alone. Did she read his mind? "You didn't have any Talent but saved those who did. You stood with Ultimates as an equal, not because you had a secret Talent you didn't know of, but because of one simple thing. The thing that Dio hoards and fears most of all. The reason why he keeps trying to crush it within you."

It was like a Class Trial, come to think about it, now that Hinata was having to decide between possibilities again. Rather than three poisoned chalices, he just had to think about something that Dio wanted but also wanted away from Hinata.

It wasn't Stand power. Dio's Alter Ego lacked Stands and Hinata could only access Boulevard from what seemed like the insides of his mind. It wasn't as if it was a matter of intelligence. In terms of raw intellect, Dio could out-smart Hinata any day.

Komaeda's words about cults rang in his head again, before he began his plot. They took on new meaning now that they knew everything that the Ultimate Luckster did in his gambit to rid the world of Ultimate Despair. It was almost funny how it would have only created a new and fouler Ultimate
Despair in its place, if Komaeda's plan had worked.

It had been about the lack of identity. Being slaves to a tyrant and loving every second of it because they didn't have to think, didn't have to grow, and didn't have to decide. All the master needed to say was to jump and they'd say how high. Living only in despair. Hinata began to realise what Komaeda meant. The very purpose of Ultimate Despair for Dio had been to create weapons that he could command on a whim. Tools utterly dependent on him to even exist.

He also realised what Dio had in spades.

"Self-belief. Confidence." Hinata said. Chiaki's smile was the first thing that gave him hope in a long time.

"You had all the Talent in the world as Izuru Kamukura and it didn't matter. You simply gave up the moment you saw problems ahead. You didn't think there was any way to fight your Fate other than to let Dio control it." Chiaki leaned in towards him. "Dio hated you for lacking desire, but feared the day you'd get a thirst for it. When you broke after, well, the real me's death, that's when he stopped caring. He realised the day he feared with Izuru Kamukura would never come. The day you believed that you wouldn't need him."

"What should I do then?" Hinata asked. She knew all of this and he was stuck in the same place he always was. Unable to overcome his troubles and stuck with a lack of talent against stronger people than him. "Izuru could defeat Dio. He could from the start. But I can't. If we let him loose, he'll ruin the world. If we shut it all down, we could just become the new terror. What would you-"

"That doesn't matter now. What I would do." Chiaki said. "You guys are the only ones who can make that choice now. Live in the past and graduate under Dio's laws, live in the present forever and simply never change, or live in the future and embrace the chaos and consequences that follows. But if neither option suits you, then why follow them?"

"What?" Hinata asked. What was Chiaki saying?

"Why should you let Dio define your life anymore?" She titled her head to the side, as if the very thought confused. "Take your own path, not the ones Dio is offering." That was when her expression became stern, her voice lost any light to it. "But you have to listen. You can't hesitate. Not now. Not anymore. Whatever choice you make, whatever future you choose, it has to be one that you decide for yourself. One that you're willing to fight for to the end. If you try hard enough, you can do anything, Hinata. But you have to try. Try with every last part of your being. No more hesitation. No more doubt. No more allowing people like Dio and the people who created Izuru to decide your future."

"So I should decide for myself?" Would it really be that simple? Could he and the others really do that?

"Hinata, it's time for you to take control your life again." Chiaki held up her fists and frowned, as if getting ready for a boxing match. It was enough to make Hinata laugh to himself at how silly she looked, as the Ultimate Gamer joined him in the soft laughter. Two friends together in the eternal darkness of Hinata's mind. She smiled again. "I think it's time to show everyone just how cool you, and our friends, can be."

The lights around him began to divide again. Hinata felt a strange feeling in his gut as he looked closer at the lights. Had they always been this bright?
No. These weren't just lights. These were the remnants of Boulevard of Broken Dreams, the surfaces of the glasses reflecting the light and making it stronger to Hinata's eyes, that were beginning to come together again. Chiaki stood by Hinata's side as the Stand formed itself again after having disappeared once before. He supposed he'd never understand exactly what his Stand was doing.

*I don't know how you work, but I think I know why you're like this.* Hinata was looking with new eyes as he looked upon the cracks and distortions on the glass surface of his Stand.

They were like him. Both Hinata and Boulevard of Broken Dreams were meant to be the perfect being together, a human with all the Talents known to Man and a Stand that could copy anything that approached its master. But they weren't the perfect being. In removing everything that made him Hajime Hinata, Hope's Peak removed everything that made him human and instead created a tool. Without the fighting spirit, Izuru's Stand could never look like the angel of Hope that it was meant to be.

But still! The Stand Boulevard of Broken Dreams was the Stand of Izuru Kamukura, the man who could do anything and everything, and was cursed to live a life without meaning, purpose, or spirit. A homunculus in the bottle that was used by Dio to destroy the world. But Izuru Kamukura was only a part of who Hajime Hinata was. He was more than just the vessel for which Hope's Peak could fill with Talent and Stand Power.

The world around Hinata turned into white light and he found himself in a Class Trial room so much like the one where he had to battle Murralsee again and again. Trying to find justice to those victimised by the demon. Now he was fighting to find himself again. All around him were copies of Kamukura, Boulevards standing between them, on the podiums and repeating the same thing they told themselves during Dio's reign of terror.

"What's the point in fighting?" "Hope's Peak deserved everything they had coming." "Dio's Holy Diver was too powerful." "What would be the point in keeping the status quo?" "I'm the true victim of all this." "The Fate Dio chose for me was better than the one by Hope's Peak." "Why do I have to choose?" "It's useless." "Useless." "Useless." "Useless." "Useless.

Had he truly been so pathetic during those days? Had Hinata himself really been so caught up in his own despair when facing down Dio?

*I sound so...uncool.* It was closer to Komaeda than anything else. That belief that somehow their actions were decided by some cosmic battle between Hope and Despair. Dio's Alter Ego had been the same, declaring that it was everyone's Fate to surrender themselves to Dio.

He looked to Chiaki, that small smile on her face, as if she knew what he just realised, and went to work.

Each and every last line spouted by the Kamukuras and Boulevards were rejected. The nihilism and determinism that ruled over him for so long, first cursing him to sign away his very self and then again as Izuru to Dio, all of that was washed away. Every word from their mouths was shut down.

His Fate was first that he'd live an unimportant life paying towards the advancement of others. Then his Fate was to be the Ultimate Hope. Then it was to be Dio's servant. No more! His future wasn't going to be decided by anyone other than himself ever again!

The feeling in his gut began to grow stronger and fiercer. Hinata wasn't going to run away anymore.
He left his friends and the Future Foundation to languish with Dio's Alter Ego for eternity because he let Dio torment him with Fate once again. Hinata was going to fix that mistake right now. Class 77-B was going to take its destiny back. Every last one of them!

They'd face Hope and they'd face Despair. That was unavoidable in life. It didn't mean they'd simply give in and let those forces control their lives any more than they'd let someone like Dio Brando control them either. They would shut-down the system, but they wouldn't simply forget everything that happened. They wouldn't return to their wretched selves again.

Hinata, Fuyuhiko, Akane, Sonia, Kazuichi, they'd all face the future together with determination. Yes, and that determination would bring them to the future that they and the class built. If the other didn't wake up, or woke up as Ultimate Despair, then they'd save them all over again. Just like they were going to save those members of the Future Foundation who risked it all to save them.

They would avenge the Chiaki Nanami of the real world who died trying to save them all from Dio, and they would avenge the Chiaki Nanami who died in the virtual world to save them again. Hinata felt the darkness fade away from him. The fire in his gut had ignited into something else, something that just couldn't be contained any longer. The Kamukuras and surrounding him shattered into nothingness and the Class Trial became a room of pure white light.

Hinata spared Chiaki one last smile and nod, shared by the AI herself, and shot forwards into the above. He was a shooting star leaping through the sky, a racing car passing by, a rocket ship heading to Mars, as he bolted past the sky and ascended forward. The fire had long since left his gut and swallowed his entire body.

Hajime Hinata left the Boulevard of Broken Dreams in the darkness below.

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The first thing he saw upon returning was Dio Brando's, or rather the AI's, horrified expression.

"No..." The AI slammed its fists against the screen-monitor again. As if that'd somehow change what he was seeing. "No!"

He must have thought Izuru Kamukura had been conquered. That he could have victory in forcing everyone else to endure an eternity in virtual limbo with him. Not anymore. The being before him must have been nothing like the Kamukura that Dio's memories told the AI about. He wasn't even like the Hajime Hinata before the Project who Dio might have researched, if he ever gave it the time.

No, this was something new. The apathy and nihilism that defined Kamukura, what made him so easy for Dio to manipulate by using a cruel Fate to motivate him, had been burnt away and would never return. Before Dio's Alter Ego was a new man. Shrouded in golden energy that spat out bursts of electricity, red eyes bursting with determination, and hair dyed in a white-golden energy that made the AI's face turn deathly pale.
"Dio, this is the end for you. I won't let you throw us back into despair any longer." Hinata snapped his arm forward and pointed a finger at Dio at whip-crack speed. "I won't let you drag us back towards our past, and I won't let you keep us away from our future!"

The AI did not take that well, spouting the same old lines as always. "Useless, useless, useless, useless, use-"

"You got that wrong!" Hinata's roar took even Dio aback. All eyes were on him, the display of verbal might enough to even knock the others out of their despair. For the first time, Dio would finally see what Kamukura's power could be when combined with spirit and willpower. "That's what you do, isn't it? Just call others' efforts useless and crush them. Break their spirits. Make them become nothing more than husks reliant on you to simply command like a King. As if that makes you strong."

"You dare challenge me, Izuru?" Dio spat. The giant Muralsee behind him growled and the massive steel chain clanged and clinked, as if to intimidate him.

"I'm not Izuru Kamukura. I'm Hajime Hinata." Hinata replied. He sighed and blinked before pointing again at Dio. "I'm shutting down the program."

He didn't say those words any louder than normal, but the weight behind them was more than enough to take everyone by surprise. The Future Foundation didn't even look relieved as the words sank in, as Dio's Alter Ego could only stand there appalled, and his friends themselves still looked so unsure. Why wouldn't they? He apparently seemed to be declaring his own destruction.

"You think an act of suicide is an act of courage?" Dio snapped. He scoffed and looked at Hinata as if he was a dish covered in flies. "What more could I have expected from you? All the Talents in the world and they had to be given to you. The power to mimic Stands and you can only grow by watching the efforts of others. A being of paradoxes and failure. It makes sense that courage to you is an act of self-destruction."

"No. I'm not destroying myself, Dio." Hinata replied. Not that someone like Dio could really understand. Although it wasn't Dio who he was saying this for. "No matter what you say, or what you think, this is not a decision to throw away the memories we made here. This is a decision to end the Neo-World Program."

Dio Brando, someone who believed in the concept of Fate and his supremacy within that design, would always laugh at such a statement. It must have looked like madness in the face of the facts. He wasn't alone in his doubts either. The Future Foundation probably thought he retreated into delusion to do the right thing. Hell, the others looked at him as if he was crazy.

"Y-You really want us to shut-down the program?" Kazuichi asked, the sweat running down his face. "B-But won't we-"

"No. I refuse to allow that future to happen." Hinata felt the golden glow around him strengthen. He restrained himself for the moment, waiting for the right moment to reveal everything. For now, he simply stuck to speaking the words in his heart. "The future that we've been given should have more possibilities than the ones Dio Brando offers. We're no longer his slaves. We don't have to follow his way."

"Fool. You think Fate is decided by the will of the weak?" Dio snapped, eye twitching as he was
forced to look at Hinata's new-found strength. Hinata wondered how much of his fury was about how the 'failed science experiment' wasn't going to bow down to him anymore. "Your friends died as they lived, Izuru. In service of Dio. You think something as pithy as not wanting it to be so will change the direction of Fate? You think this is some Shonen Jump anime where the author rewards characters for their stupidity?"

"Everyone, listen to me. We have to fight for our future. If we simply face the future with determination, if we just keep fighting, we can overcome Fate. We can't just stop and roll into a ball when faced with the challenges ahead." Hinata ignored Dio and spoke to the others. They didn't seem convinced just yet, but the despair that haunted them had mostly been dispelled. The self-pity and fear had given way to curiosity.

"Your memories will be deleted. That is a fact." Dio spoke in barks now, so much like the animal he disdained. The only thing keeping him from unleashing his wrath was the fact that, even in a simulation, he was nothing more than an image behind the screen. The only power he had was the power they gave him. "Delusions will not save you from reality! I will not be lectured on the power of the human spirit by someone who knows nothing of it. What is your existence but a mere few moments of a virtual simulation? Who are you if not the result of a failed science experiment? What is your Stand other than a parasite leeching the efforts of actual humans?"

Soft gasps came from the others. Dio's words were daggers, thrown with the intention to bring Hinata down. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders. "You're right. Boulevard of Broken Dreams is a Stand that can only copy others. Just like Izuru Kamukura relied on the Talents on others to have any worth. That Stand came from trying to create perfection. To create Hope by Talent instead of people."

Dio grinned at that. The AI was like the master in the pleasure he gained from the vindication that his Stand was truly the mightiest of them all; that Kamukura's Stand was merely a fluke, an artificial construct that cheated Dio from his destiny everyone else looks down. Even as Holy Diver was long-gone from both the virtual and real world, Dio's Alter Ego needed that sign just as much as its master once did.

The others seemed deflated at that. Naegi and Kirigiri looked on Hinata with pity, Togami merely keeping himself to well-concealed sympathy, and the others seemed insulted and saddened for him. If they weren't so fearful of Dio, he'd even bet that at least Akane would have left her podium and threatened to fight Dio's Alter Ego as she had with Murralsee.

Hinata only had to look Dio in the eye and smile back.

"But that's not my Stand anymore." He said, as he was finally able to stop holding it back.

Just a metre behind him burst out a figure caked in bright light. Hinata did not have to turn to look at it and he already had the perfect idea of what it looked like. Where Boulevard of Broken Dreams was billions of glass fragments a mere instant away from shattering apart from one another, there were no cracks or imperfections on this Stand now.

Along with the glass skin of the Stand you could see a dance of every colour imaginable. All of them mixing and merging to form new colours and images for any keen eye to behold. For now, the colours stabilised and all along the skin of the Stand you would be able to see the image of a blue sky littered with golden-white clouds rushing past. All except for two parts, the first being its eyes; the left was red as blood and the right was hazel-green like Hinata's own eyes.
The second was probably got the most attention. The only thing about the Stand that was
different from the glass skin was its forehead where the arrow-head jutted out from. The Stand
Arrow gleamed in all its glory as the pattern stared Dio's Alter Ego as if mocking him. The spirit
Hinata had gained, that will to fight for his future, had finally won the Stand Arrow over to him.

The only thing he regretted was that, when they woke up, he'd have to explain the arrow-head
patterns all over his body now. Somehow, he doubted they'd just accept that his body had become
one with the Stand Arrow as well.

Even in the virtual world, where Stands were not meant to trespass, a Stand user could still witness
them. The only reason that Fuyuhiko, Akane, Sonia, and Kazuichi were taken aback was that they
had no memories of their own Stands. Not that it seemed to make a difference with the Future
Foundation or Dio himself. They had worked under the certainty that no Stand could ever do such a
thing.

A certainty that Hinata had just destroyed.

"You don't know everything about Stands, Dio. It's not a one-off deal. They respond to the wishes of
humans strong enough to carry them. I wanted to be talented, so it gave me Boulevard, but I still
lacked what it needs most to grant its gifts. So Hope's Peak place it inside my body thinking it'd do
better next time. But it rejected me every time. Because it knew that I didn't have the fighting spirit.
Izuru Kamukura simply lived in the moment, simply accepting whatever Fate he was given. That's
not me, Dio. I will fight for the future that we've fought for. It won't be a future where our friends
give you their lives or their bodies any longer."

"This can't be. Stands can't appear in this virtual reality." Dio, once so confident and sure of himself,
was now sputtering to get his words out. If he could sweat, he'd be drenched in it. "That's a rule that
even I, Dio, had not overcome in life."

"That's just it, Dio. Certainty. Fate. The concepts that bind humans to paths they fight and resist
when they see the troubles ahead. The rules that say we have to choose between destroying our
selves or destroying the world." Hinata stood tall and slammed his right palm against the podium. He
then pointed above himself, towards the sky, where his Stand flexed and unleashed an array of lights.
"But my Stand rejects that. It rejects any fate that restricts our future, and replaces it with an
uncertainty that we face with our hearts and minds.

"Dio, witness our determination taken form. The Stand that embodies the end of the terrible Fates that
have tormented us for so long. Boulevard of Broken Dreams Requiem: Don't Stop Me Now!"

Kirigiri, for the first time, looked completely flabbergasted. "Requiem?" She asked, barely able to get
the word out. "There's a second-level to Stands?"

"Holy crap, am I the only one seeing this?" Fuyuhiko added. To his credit, it wasn't every day that
you saw a glass version of your friend emerge from out of nowhere and burst out multi-coloured
lights from its skin.

"A Stand that rejects Fate?" Dio's Alter Ego whispered. The flash of fear in his eyes was instantly
erased and replaced with by boiling rage. Denial. The response to every dictator when they were
forced into the bunker and their armies were collapsing around them. "Impossible! Even if that's true,
you can't re-shape the laws of reality before they happen! Holy Diver itself could only change what
already happened. There is no way that your Stand could surpass my own. If you change 100% to
99.9% ongoing, it's still impossible."
"But it won't be 100%." Hinata replied, glaring right back at Dio. "And that's what matters."

Dio didn't look as strong as he had when he first arrived; his carrier brought in by a gigantic version of the demonic Murralsee who forced them into the Mutual Killing Game. Hinata met every attempt at a bullying glare or scoff with his own force of will and it was more than enough against the AI. The giant Murralsee even looked like it was about to take a step back in fright.

Hinata was ready to fight Dio all day when he noticed Sonia looking towards him.

"It's these two buttons, isn't it?" She asked, making the great and mighty Dio Brando gasp. She put two hands against her heart. "I felt it as soon as I saw this 'Don't Stop Me Now'. A warm light shooting across an ocean of darkness and despair, guiding me towards the future you spoke of. The future we create is going to be the future everyone created, isn't it? Then do not stop me now either!"

"It's suicide! Would you really kill yourselves to spite me?" Dio howled. There was anger in his voice, but no one could deny that there was fear inside it as well.

"Maybe it is suicide. Even Hajime said that thing only eliminates certainty," Fuyuhiko chuckled and smiled towards Hinata. "Still, if it's enough that Peko was yelling at me to do something, that's good enough for me. I'm not gonna stand here crying when I can do something about it. Let's show Dio what we really think of his crap when we're not his slaves."

"I'm not the thinking type, but follow me on this." Akane leaned in on her podium, one eye raised and looking right at the fuming AI. "I like to fight the strong, Dio, and you're saying you're the strongest ever, right? So why shouldn't I fight you?" She smirked and leaned back again. "That's what it means to be confident, isn't it?"

Dio couldn't even reply when Kazuichi cut in. The fear was obvious on his face, even his smile was shaking, but he was smiling nonetheless. "If you're all doing this, I'm not gonna chicken out. If there's really nothing left, might as well defend what we've got now."

The five of them moved to press the buttons Graduate and Repeat, the only way to activate the shutdown sequence and end all this. With a press of the buttons, joined in by the Future Foundation, the entire world shook and Dio's Alter Ego never looked so frightened as it did at this moment. It probably never realised that there might have been a way back for those who he wrote off as his minions. Mere hounds of war that could have ever regained their own will.

As always, Dio reacted with fury and spite.

"You fools think I'll just let this happen?" Dio's Alter Ego threw a hand across the screen and looked up towards the massive demonic entity behind him. "Murralsee, destroy them all."

"Dio!" Naegi snapped, grabbing the ends of the podium hard enough to turn his knuckles white. "Is there no depths you won't sink just to avoid losing?"

"It's okay." Hinata said. Not even the sight of Murralsee raising the giant steel whip, large and strong enough to tear through an entire building if cracked right, bothered him. A smirk came to his face as he readied Don't Stop Me Now. "It's not like he's gonna win."

A crack of the whip that echoed loud enough that the others moved to cover their ears, Hinata not having that luxury as he had to focus, and Murralsee cast its metallic chains forward to smite the
others. Maybe Dio was gambling on their deaths somehow ending the Neo-World Program and letting him take their bodies. It was a solid plan, if you were desperate enough.

What it didn't count on was Don't Stop Me Now. The Stand shot into the air and threw out its hand to catch one of the massive links in the steel-chain whip before it even came close to where the others stood. It reached twenty feet in the air when the Stand put its hand against the chain-link and grabbed on as tight as it could. When the grip was tight enough, Don't Stop Me Now jerked the chain directly towards the Stand itself. The certainty that the giant Murralsee wouldn't even budge was shattered as the towering goliath stumbled towards the speeding Stand rushing towards it, closing the distance to avoid the shock-waves hitting where everyone was standing.

In a stunning display of might and speed, Don't Stop Me Now managed to force the towering demon towards it. Letting go of the link in its grasp, the Stand could focus its fists on the threat to the others. The world was shaking and crumbling around them, yet no one couldn't have heard the sound of Don't Stop Me Now's fists crashing against the looming face-protection of the Murralsee.

Had Dio's Alter Ego been that kind of AI, maybe it could have counted the hundreds of blows that the Stand laid onto the demon. Maybe it could have given a calculation on the force behind each and every punch and kick that turned steel into nothing more than a thin sheet of paper against a solid hammer. With a final blow, the Murralsee was sent stumbling back and nearly fell over on its feet.

It stabilised itself in time to find itself fighting with Usami now. The tiny mascot who had tried so hard to be their teacher was now shooting out literal rainbows at the executioner of Dio's will. Each light destroyed the fists of Dio's protector, and long strips of rainbow-light followed Usami's wand as it turned and coiled around it. The beast was slowly being trapped, as Hinata kept Don't Stop Me Now close in case Murralsee tried something.

Dio was reduced to incoherent screaming.

"Time and time again, you all keep getting in my way!" Dio looked down towards Hinata again. The look in his eye was a crazed animal's, cornered and rabid, rather than the usual regal contempt behind it. The true face of the 'Ultimate Master'. "You think this is over! I am Dio! I will never die, so long as there are those who yearn for the world to know Heaven. You think you can save your friends and the wretched world outside? A child's dream! No Stand could have that kind of power!"

Hinata closed his eyes and let his smile drop for a moment. "As I said, all I can really do is destroy Fate when it gets in the way of our future. I'm not saying they'll all wake up immediately, tomorrow, or maybe even a year." Hinata opened his eyes again and pointed at Dio, a small current of electricity coming out from his fingertips. "But they will wake up, Dio. They'll wake up remembering everything that's happened, and everything you've done to them before and during this sick game of yours. And we'll be right beside them when that day comes, knowing everything that happened here. If they're in Despair, we will give them the hope they need.

"Dio," Hinata paused. Not out of mercy or pity, but merely to ready himself for what would come next. He pointed at Dio one last time and didn't hesitate in his words. "We won't let you take away our future!"

"This was the big fight? Huh. Didn't think it'd be this easy." Akane said, almost sounding let down. Hinata was glad to disappoint.

"Trust me, it wasn't the first time around." Kirigiri replied, Togami letting out a soft murmur in support.
"Besides, this is only the beginning." Naegi said, looking towards Hinata. It was as if Dio wasn't even a relevancy anymore. But how could he? "If you really believe in what you said, just know that we'll be behind you the whole way."

In the end, Don't Stop Me Now wasn't even needed. Usami's 'spell' was complete and it sent out a final ray of rainbow light straight into the forehead section of the mostly-shattered helmet, easily piercing through the metal. The once-towering and threatening figure that toyed with Hinata and the others was now a collapsing piece of scrap metal that plummeted down to both the abyss below and to where the carrier where Dio's Alter Ego let out a final scream of defiance before the metal came crashing down.

As the dust cleared, all they could see was the monitor-screen in front of a collection of broken circuitry and random bursts of electricity. The screen was flickering between showing a tired Dio and static. To think that this was the man who once controlled all of their lives.

"Cur-Ca-Curse you, I-I-I-Izuru," Dio managed to say, as the connection was lost between the words, and the system began to shut down. "Sh-should have killed you before the Ki-ki-Killing Game. If you can he-hear this, it's u-u-up to you now, my fri-fr-friiiiiii-end. You must be the one to reach He-hehev-"

The AI couldn't even finish its sentence before the screen went black for too long for it to have not shut down. Just like the rest of the Neo-World Program, the Alter Ego of Dio Brando had now shared the fate of its master. Dead and never to return. It was finally over.

The last few moments of the simulation were relatively uneventful. The Future Foundation said their goodbyes and trusted in the former Ultimate Despairs to return to their bodies safe and sound. There was even something in Naegi's voice that made Hinata wonder if the guy would have believed in them even without Don't Stop Me Now.

All that was left was for the last people in this simulation to make their way out. Hinata could see the fear in everyone's faces, it was just as obvious as the sinking feeling in his own gut, but he also recognised the hope in their eyes. The same hope that they had once forgotten because of Dio.

"So what do you think our Stands look like? Think it'll be something cool?" Akane asked, her voice mostly level. Maybe thinking of how it looked was to help take her mind off the destruction.

"I suppose we'll learn that when we get out." Sonia replied. She held her hands together and looked away, although there wasn't much to look at with the podiums becoming the only thing still standing in a sea of pure white. "I do hope mine won't be something horrible."

"Nothing about you is horrible, Ms Sonia. If Dio corrupted it somehow, we'll just have Hajime's Stand fix it." Kazuichi said, a bright smile on his face. It might have helped if he didn't yelp when he heard another part of the stage where they stood crumble into nothing.

"Nope." Hinata replied. That stricken look on Kazuichi's face was enough to make Hinata kind of embarrassed. Didn't he explain it already? "Don't Stop Me Now is a Stand that can destroy Fate, but it can't change what's already happened."

"Yeah, it figures." Fuyuhiko grumbled. With a sigh, he nodded towards Hinata and gave a soft smile. "Just do your thing, we'll do ours, and it'll all be back to normal before you know it. Not like you've led us wrong before, Hajime."
Mere seconds passed and the four of them disappeared into the light as well. It was just Hinata and Don't Stop Me Now left.

It was funny how what was meant to have been the last remnants of Hajime Hinata were going to disappear with the last remnants of the Neo-World Program. Maybe the avatar self wouldn't survive, but the memories he held within him would. They'd pass onto the body of what was once Izuru Kamukura and give birth to the new Hajime Hinata.

After years of being nothing more than weapons who lived by the beck and call of a monster, they would be free to choose their own future again.

Just the beginning, huh? Hinata looked up towards the sky, or rather the white void that sat where the sky would be, and smiled to himself. He could already feel his body slowly slipping away into nothingness; Don't Stop Me Now getting ready for the right moment to activate. We won't let you rule our lives anymore, Dio. I'm scared. I'm really scared. But that doesn't mean I won't stop moving forward.

This was it. Hinata was phasing out of the reality of the Neo-World Program. With his final words, he could finally say the words he was never able to say to her, whether in this world or the real one.

"Thank you, Chiaki," Hinata said, finally speaking the words he wished he could have said before. "We'll play games again, someday. But before that, I got a lot of catching up to do first. Hope you won't mind waiting."

As he finished his sentence, Hinata knew that time had run out for this world. Both his body and the world around turned into nothing but white light. Not even the avatar of Don't Stop Me Now was able to resist this, nor was it going to in the first place. After all, why just sit in nothingness when there was a world outside just waiting for them?

The final act in this world was Don't Stop Me Now shattering the Fate of both Class 77-B and Hinata himself. The fate that Dio has described for them if the shut-down sequence was activated. It would only happen once the world itself ended, so it was better to do it as close to the mark as possible. Maybe Hinata was being superstitious, or just poetic, but the result was the same.

Hinata let himself sink into nothingness to the sound of a cruel and despair-filled Fate being shattered and replaced with a void. A void just waiting to be filled with the determination of those who were willing to fight for their futures.

White lights filled his vision, before being replaced with by endless darkness, and then by a sharp pale green followed by a chorus of humming machinery and distant voices hurriedly talking amongst themselves.

After being asleep for so long, Hajime Hinata finally woke up.
Stand Stats

**Boulevard of Broken Dreams**

User: Izuru Kamukura

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: N/A
- Speed: N/A
- Range: N/A
- Durability: N/A
- Precision: N/A
- Developmental Potential: E

**Abilities**
Stand is able to mimic any Stand upon the user seeing it use its abilities. Stand is then able to use those abilities whenever the user decides to do so.

Boulevard of Broken Dreams can shatter into numerous 'shards' with which user can use to look at surrounding. Stands caught within sight of these shards can be copied as well.

User can only use the abilities of a single Stand at a time. Has to 'swap' Stands to change abilities used.

**Don't Stop Me Now (Boulevard of Broken Dreams Requiem)**

User: Hajime Hinata

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: C
- Speed: A
- Range: B
- Durability: A
- Precision: A
- Developmental Potential: A

**Abilities**
Can bestow Stands to those capable of wielding them. If the target already has a Stand, that Stand is instead strengthened.

Can negate Fate and destroy certainty. Cannot replace that Fate with another and cannot alter probability but merely creates an unknown in place of that Fate. This 'vacuum' is filled with additional energy of either Hope or Despair from user and others around user and the future that replaces it is determined by the will of those who wish for a certain outcome.

**Beat It**

User: Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: B
- Speed: C
- Range: D
- Durability: C
- Precision: B
Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**
User has the power to increase and decrease intensity of injuries dealt to and by self and to and by others tenfold.

Stand can transfer user's injuries to another via physical contact by user or by Stand and vice versa. Time taken to transfer said injuries rely on distance between injury and target, and length of physical contact between user and target.

**Ballroom Blitz**
**User: Sonia Nevermind**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: A
- Speed: B
- Range: A
- Durability: C
- Precision: D
- Developmental Potential: C

**Abilities**
Stand causes everyone within a radius of up to 150m to direct their attention towards the user.

Those affected attempt to make physical contact with the user and will try to sabotage one another to be the first by any means necessary. The energy generated by these efforts is transferred over to the Stand itself. When someone is the first to touch the user's skin or clothes, they are struck by the sum total of the physical force exerted by all those who tried to reach the user.

Effect is only cancelled by either will of the user or by someone making physical contact with the user. Those caught in range whilst the user is moving are affected as well and cannot remove until someone makes contact.

User cannot alter range of effect once activated.

**Welcome to the Machine**
**User: Kazuichi Souda**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: C
- Range: C
- Durability: A
- Precision: B
- Developmental Potential: A

**Abilities**
Stand requires user to make physical contact with target's skin prior to activation.

Physical contact turns part of target into mechanical construct. User can disassemble, reassemble, and make alteration to the limb. If the user is touching the head, then certain changes apply to the whole body. User cannot kill with this Stand and target's head cannot be permanently disassembled.
When alterations are made, the limb reverts to human form with the changes made. Areas affected by Welcome to the Machine cannot be used to attack the user. If the head is affected, then the target themselves cannot attack the user.

**Eye of the Tiger**

**User:** Akane Owari

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: B
- Speed: B
- Range: E
- Durability: B
- Precision: D
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**
User turns and magnifies their caloric intake into energy. Can take numerous forms such as flames from body, enhanced muscular structure, increased flexibility of joints, and other forms of body enhancement. Rapid increase in speed and strength.
Special Chapter: Holy Diver IF

Chapter Notes

This one turned out to be a lot longer than I expected it to be. I am proud of it and I think I did justice with both Jonathan's character and his relationship with Dio. So here it is. Holy Diver IF a.k.a. What if the Joestars weren't completely gone?

Special Chapter: Holy Diver IF

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How is it that a world comes to be?

Is it the unconquerable and divine plan that we call Fate? Or is it the incomprehensible and jumbled mess that comes with trillions of 'IFs' being decided at once?

If this person turned left instead of right. If I say hello to the person sitting next to me instead of ignoring them. If I marry this person despite not loving them, rather than risking loneliness and breaking up with them.

Choices upon choices that create and destroy worlds the second that they are made. Yet what of Fate? You can not simply assume that there is an IF for a world where people can fly simply by flapping their arms. Nor can you presume that a choice can affect everything that exists within the universe itself. No, there are some things which cannot be changed no matter what is done.

Mankind will feel hope and despair in life. That in itself is the nature of the human heart and cannot be changed by anything but a God. There will be those who live a life seeking to create and build, and there will be those who live a life seeking to consume and devour. There will even be those who live a life destroying the world around them; even if it means ruining themselves. Surely an IF would have to account for these?

In one IF, a man whose thirst for power often drives him to discard his humanity is not in a world that offers such a choice. Instead, he is forced to languish until finding peace of mind, and finds the crusade that shall define his life. He all but destroys the old world and builds a cruel game to force the last beacons of hope to submit to him in the belief that this will be his coronation as a God. An Ultimate Master above those with and without Talent.

Those who challenged and confounded him in most worlds are not in this IF. It falls instead to a boy who was once defined by his sharp turns in luck to unite with the people he had idolised, and even became friends with, and cast this false god down from his high throne. To use the embodiment of their fighting spirits to rally his victims against him and end his cruel reign.

Yet there is another IF. What if the Joestars were in that world with Dio Brando?
Not all of the Joestars. A battle that lasted over hundred years in their IFs had too many warriors to all arrive to fight against Dio. But what about three? Three Joestars who fought for good and justice and managed to win the day in many worlds? Could even just a single one replicate their success? To challenge Fate and triumph?

The curtain lowers...

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Jonathan Joestar, also known as JoJo, was almost embarrassed by the attention given to him. Not that he'd ever show such a thing. His father had taught him many things in life, some he learned quicker than others, as memories of bruised knuckles at the dinner table came to him, and one of them was how to hide discomfort behind a good-natured smile. If one managed to keep their composure, or at least the image of it, then the situation would calm itself in turn.

As if a dinner party in his honour was a situation. Jonathan would never say such a thing in public, and the very thought almost made his face redden in shame. All of these people here to celebrate his achievement and he was acting as if that was a problem.

To be accepted into the prestigious and illustrious Hope's Peak Academy was not something you heard of every day. Only the most Talented-until last year where those who could afford the fees could join-were allowed entrance into the school.

Lord George Joestar, Jonathan's father, had been delighted to hear the good news after weeks of issues with Jonathan's brother. Not that this was the time to ruminate on such things! Now was the time to simply relax himself and accept well-wishes from friends and family, among other things.

Jonathan's mind trailed off as he turned his eyes towards the woman of his dreams and love of his life. To imagine months without being in the company of Erina Pendleton was undoubtedly one of the worst things about having to leave for Japan. To learn a new language would be challenging, but he had been making progress for some time. To learn how to live with love far away was another matter.

He had internet and long-distance calls, but it just wouldn't be the same. To feel the touch of her skin as they held hands. To hear the sound of her laugh as they played in the river. All of the time they shared and spent together in good times and bad. The two had been inseparable ever since they first got to know each other, Jonathan defending her from those dreadful bullies, until now.

She had even been there for the death of Danny. His father had done all he could but he had been busy trying to pull Jonathan's brother away from the corruption fame was bringing and his brother fought those efforts with all he had. It had simply been Erina and him bonding over the memories Jonathan had with who had been his best friend until his passing last year.

The only good thing about The Incident had been that it replaced dark misery with burning passion when Jonathan had seen it with his own eyes. The infamous and eccentric fashion model, Dio Brando, back-handing Erina across the room for some unknown crime had unleashed something within Jonathan that he never knew he had. A burning energy within.

Jonathan had always been a keen boxer. From it being the only way to bond with the poorer children
his age, to honing his craft to a high level, to winning enough amateur tournaments to attract the attention of Hope's Peak. Yet, without a doubt, it had been his scuffle with that terrible man that had been his hardest bout.

It wasn't like the matches he knew. Fists were thrown with an intent to gouge out eyes, let alone knock him out, and Dio hadn't hesitated to kick and bite when he could. Jonathan suspected that the rage blinding him and alcohol slowing Dio was what truly ended the fight in a knock-out blow.

His father had been horrified to hear of the story. Jorge had just started to fall into the dark realms that came with extreme fame and glory in the horse-riding world, and now his eldest and legitimate son was getting into fights. Erina's story, backed up by friends nearby, had vindicated Jonathan but there had been a long time where his father looked at him with a sharper eye than before.

If he couldn't stop one son from falling, he could do his best with another. Jonathan thought grimly to himself. Amongst all the guests and revelry, there was one noted absence that Jonathan was ashamed to admit was almost welcomed.

Jorge hadn't been like him. The blonde hair had done more than enough to differ him from his elder brother but it wasn't just that. Jonathan hadn't enjoyed his father's stern teachings but he grew from them, whereas Jorge resented them. He resisted every lesson and nursed his grudges. Perhaps that was inevitable when you felt like you didn't belong.

When you thought your father's shame at his affair was shame at the result of it as well.

The brothers had been close once, Jorge loved Danny as Jonathan did and even now was as polite as he could be to both him and Erina, but Jonathan hadn't acquired Jorge's fame. He wasn't surrounded by those offering seemingly unconditional affection, only to seek to be close to the boy with the money. As Jorge collapsed into hedonism, Jonathan found himself estranged from his little brother.

Jonathan realised that he'd have to think of something else. He went back to looking at Erina and moved to come and join her. It would be best to spend as much time with the woman he loved as possible, before leaving for Japan next month to attend Hope's Peak.

The Ultimate Boxer, that's what he'd soon be known as. To achieve an Olympic medal in boxing had been his dream for so long, and it might even be in his grasp within a few years. Now it seemed like more the perfect moment to achieve his new dream.

To begin life with Erina as a couple.

As he took the first step, however, he felt a hand tap on his shoulder. Jonathan turned to see a pale, almost sweating, face just on the border of being too close to his own stare into him. He kept enough composure to avoid flinching, but took a step back to look at the man before him. Thin like a tree branch with limbs almost too long for him, the man was in a business suit that did little to add any aura to him. Not when a near-balding head was gleaming with sweat.

"Mister Joestar, I am sorry to intrude," He said, offering a weak shaking smile. "But my client wishes to speak with you by the balcony. He claims to have met you once and wanted to give a more...personal regards as to your acceptance into Hope's Peak Academy."

"More personal?" Jonathan looked around. Most of the people extending praise had already done so, and the attention turned to themselves, for the time being. Was this person shy? "I suppose there wouldn't be any harm in meeting this request."
This person had been impressed enough with Jonathan to overcome their apparent shyness. How could Jonathan refuse them when they had summoned such courage?

It had been a brief walk towards the balcony, the chance at fresh air being welcomed after so long in the halls. There was even a full-moon out, if he recalled correctly, a fine way to open conversation with the person standing by the balustrade. It was too dark to recognise them solely from their back being turned to him, but there was something about that hair and that height...

Jonathan only recognised Dio Brando when the latter turned around and smiled. A smile that almost seemed soft and genuine, but Jonathan kept his guard up regardless.

"Dio Brando!" He barely took enough care to avoid his shout echoing into the hall. The gentle music and hum of conversations might have covered it up, but he would not have the memories of today stained by this man's presence. "To show up here after what you did. The nerve!" He almost readied himself to throw this intruder out here and there.

That was until Dio held his hands out. Jonathan might have taken that as an insult, a hand to silence an unruly servant or child, were it not for the look in Dio's eyes. A look of what seemed to be genuine contrition.

"Jonathan, I know how I acted last year, and I know I have no excuse for it but please," Dio said, his voice carrying none of the bravado of last year. Not even the confidence of his interviews. "I am a changed man asking for forgiveness. I chose today because I hoped good fortune might make you more forgiving, even if I don't deserve it."

He kept his guard up. Even if Dio was honest in his words, that alone would not be good enough. "I'm not the one who deserves the apology. You struck Erina for standing up for her friend. A friend who asked you many times to leave her be from your drunken groping."

"And I plan on apologising to Erina, and her friend, as well, preferably in private so to avoid a scene for either of us. But you have to admit that, had you seen us together in likely to be tense conversation, you'd have thought the worst of me." Dio said. His words were smooth as a snake but didn't seem to carry deceit, nor were his words false.

It had only been after their brawl that Jonathan learnt about Dio Brando himself. A popular young model who was well-regarded for his beauty and physique, but never quite reached the levels of global fame or regard, for many reasons. His temper was one of them. Magazines were reluctant to work with someone who had tantrums over his facial expressions and the exact body pose taken.

There had even been horror-stories of how he treated staff and hanger-ons who displeased. For all that Jorge sank into the temptations of fame, despite the Joestar family's best efforts, he had the good sense to avoid the company of those like Dio Brando. The tales of his difficulty to work with had been enough to deny him a place at Hope's Peak Academy itself.

It had been that rejection which apparently drove him to the bottle on that very night. Erina's friend had not known for the darker side of his reputation and only saw a beautiful yet distraught face. By the time she realised what she had been getting into, Dio had been a predator refusing to let go of its grip. Erina managed to get him away, only to be struck as if she was a fighter instead of a woman.

Jonathan didn't care to learn much else about Dio after that fight. Good riddance to bad rubbish was his motto upon hearing that Dio had left for a photo-shoot in Japan. Yet he had heard tales since that
fight. Tales which might have warmed his heart had he not been nursing this particular grudge.

Whatever happened to Dio Brando, it had changed him in ways people didn't expect. Where pictures of his face once couldn't hide the glare and sense that he loathed revealing his skin to the unworthy, there was now a new serenity to every picture. As if he knew that his body was desired and that he simply deigned to share this gift to the world itself. An egotism that allured rather than alienated.

His entire pose was that of total self-confidence and belief enough that photographers no longer asked him to do certain poses. They simply let the man himself dictate the nature of the photo-shoot himself. Who else would know the best positions for the body over than the man himself after all?

It worked enough that Dio Brando went from the top ten models in Britain to arguably the biggest figure in his industry world-wide.

Yet there was none of that confidence here. Only a sense that this was a man who knew that he did wrong and wanted to make amends.

If he has changed, and is willing to apologise to Erina and her friend in person, Those last two were the most important. Jonathan could forgive a man for wronging him if they had made a mistake, or had true regret for their actions. Someone who had dared to hurt Erina, however, would need to prove themselves. An act Dio seemed willing to perform. I may as well attempt to give him a chance. To be forgiving of those willing to change is a virtue.

Jonathan breathed out and gave Dio a hard stare. No threats, but a warning. "You understand that I'm not going to let you be alone with Erina, when it comes to apologising. If I even think you may lose your temper-"

"This is your home. If someone caused a ruckus in my home, I, Dio, would wish for them to leave as well." Dio replied. The smile on his face seemed one of acceptance at the conditions instead of victory. Jonathan almost thought Dio had learnt humility until he saw the blonde glare at the man who brought him here. "Leave us, we would prefer to talk alone."

The man who Jonathan presumed was an assistant slithered away as if afraid to stay even a second longer. Jonathan was about to scold Dio for such rude manners when he was distracted by a memory. The memory of the man who convinced his father to not mention the incident to the news. The man who seemed so smug and sure of himself at the time.

How had Dio's manager become that man?

"Just a few months ago, he'd leech off my earnings and claim I'd be nowhere without him. Now he does all he can to keep his job." Dio muttered bringing Jonathan's attention back to him. The male-model sighed to himself and scoffed. "An unfortunate tie to a past I care little for."

"How did you ever end up in the modelling industry? When we first met, you didn't seem the type to enjoy such attention." Jonathan asked. That had been an understatement; some of the covers he was on looked closer to a wanted poster than a fashion magazine cover.

"It's a long story. Let's just say my father had friends who saw potential and both owed and were owed favours. Not one you'd like to hear on a night like this," Dio replied. That had ended that train of thought, which was fine by Jonathan. It would be rude to force his way into a conversation that was clearly a sensitive matter. Dio smirked at Jonathan. "The Ultimate Boxer. Not that I doubt the legitimacy of your title, definitely not after last year, but I thought they already had one."
"He's graduated now, from what I hear. Although he now works there," Jonathan had hoped that they might have had a friendly talk when he arrived. The look of Juzo Sakakura in all the magazines, however, made Jorge's worst days look like Danny. "It might be awkward."

There tended to be a gulf between the amateur Olympic style and the professional version that tended to be shown on television. Jonathan held no disdain for professional boxers, if a bit of worry about the concussion rates, and he only had to watch a few moments of Sakakura to know that this was a man who could box. There were few flaws in his motions, little wasted energy in each strike, and he rarely moved unless he was sure that a blow would connect.

With those skills, and a three year lead on Jonathan, there was little doubt in Jonathan's mind that Sakakura would win a bout against him if they fought right now.

The manager seemed to be taking his time in collecting Erina, so Jonathan began to explain those very facts to Dio. The model had experience of boxing, but it had been more a part of MMA training and was of the back-street sort where the rules were to brutalise rather than triumph over the opponent. Even then, Dio and Jonathan found common ground in other areas.

Both played and were interested in rugby, intrigued by the mystery and legacy of Hope's Peak, and had been glad to see a change in Dio's attitude and self.

Dio called it attaining peace of mind. If that was what it took, then Jonathan welcomed Dio's discovery.

The model himself was engrossed in the conversation. His eyes went straight through Jonathan and it felt as if Dio was reading him like a book. Devouring every single fact he knew about the man who he had fought like a beast with just last year.

Where there was once a beast's contempt, now there seemed to be nothing more than a man's curiosity. A curiosity that Jonathan unknowingly fed further.

That wasn't to say he entirely forgave Dio. Erina had accepted the apology given, as sincere and heartfelt as any Jonathan knew, but even Dio could tell that Erina had by no means forgiven Dio for such. In an act of good character, Dio said nothing and silently accepted that he would have to either accept the burden of his sin or keep working to attain forgiveness for its own sake.

Jonathan and Erina were at least able to extract further friendly conversation from Dio. Twenty minutes passed before Jonathan finally trusted himself to ask a question that had just came to his mind. Now that Dio had both calmed his temper and achieved the heights of fame, it was likely that he would be in the same parties as Jorge. He'd in a position to help Jonathan's brother.

It might seem intrusive to the jockey, but Jonathan could see no other way. He couldn't ask Erina to follow Jorge around, or to go to the sort of celebrations that Jorge indulged himself in. But Dio? Dio knew those dens of sin. He could be there and at least try to guide Jorge away from his self-destructive path and towards something more constructive. If only for the sake of what was right.

Dio agreed to do so and Jonathan chose to trust him. They even agreed to exchange numbers and meet up again if Dio ever came to Japan. Erina herself was cautious but not entirely unhappy, and Jonathan took that as a sign that she did not forgive Dio but she didn't line out the idea that he had changed.
Thus began what would be Dio's second bizarre friendship.

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Hope's Peak was not what Jonathan expected it to be.

The teachers were meant to have some grasping of at least English and Japanese, with smatterings of the languages of foreign students, and the same was expected of the students as well. That much was clear on all the pamphlets and school information. Naturally, he presumed that this would be coupled by a rigorous curriculum.

What he discovered was something completely different. Attendance in class was not compulsory, the standards for teachers seemed to be that they could repeat what was said on the curriculum, and the only examination that mattered was the practical one. A demonstration of your Talents and how they have grown under the tutelage of Hope's Peak Academy.

Talent was core to the ideals of Hope's Peak, that was true, but surely a school was meant to nurture more than just that! Jonathan was sure that Mr Kizakura was a fine scout for the school and had a great passion for it, but none of that passion or drive extended towards teaching itself. On the days that he did attend, that in itself shocking for a teacher to easily miss days, he was often drunk.

Jonathan had only met something close to his whole class for a single day and that was the entrance ceremony. There had even been absences on that day as well. After that, most of them simply just left for their own devices and didn't care one bit for class or friendship. Out of the sixteen members of Class 77-B, only six had regularly turned up to class and that included Jonathan.

That wasn't to say all of it was terrible back then. Jonathan had his moral issues with letting someone like the Ultimate Yakuza have the chance to grow in his skills, a complaint that Fuyuhiko did not appreciate, but at least he seemed grateful enough to attend classes. It was just a shame that the two seemed incapable of forming a bond, Jonathan already written-off as a goodie-two-shoes, in the Yakuza's words.

Miss Hiyoko had been another who wrote him off. What the Ultimate Traditional Dancer lacked in height, she could make up for with foul venom. Every time that Jonathan defended one of her victims, mostly Miss Mikan for her clumsiness, she grumbled about him going for the gentle giant routine. That was the gentlest insult in a barrage of un-ladylike words.

Miss Mahiru seemed to not mind Miss Hiyoko's treatment of others and resented it when Jonathan tried to get her to scold the tiny dancer, but they had mostly managed to get along with one another. She appreciated Jonathan's manners and willingness to keep back those like the Ultimate Chef. They even bonded over a mutual interest in photographs of the latest archaeological findings.

The two main friends he had made within the class had been Miss Sonia, having preferred to not be known as Princess to her classmates, and Miss Mikan. He and Sonia bonded over shared upbringing and values, along with trying to get the others more involved in the class, whilst he was often Miss Mikan's protector against both her many falls and from Miss Hiyoko's tongue.

Outside of class, Jonathan had spent his time practising his Japanese, honing his boxing skills further, and engaging in hobbies such as archaeology. It wasn't like he'd spend the rest of his life as a boxer. When he won his medals and started a family with Erina, Jonathan wanted to be an archaeologist.
His father knew of such dreams and supported them. He had been shocked as well to hear of how Hope's Peak truly operated, but he had been proud to know that Jonathan had kept to the values of the Joestar name.

"It's good that you aren't mimicking the others, Jonathan. Remember. A true gentleman's virtues will shine through and inspire others." His father explained, over the phone. "Serve as an ideal and others will follow your example."

The conversation had been good for both of them. Jorge was slipping further away from them after Jonathan left, and the time he spent at home was arguing again and again with Father. George Joestar just couldn't open his heart to his second son, and Jorge refused to deviate from the path of self-destruction he found himself on.

Jonathan had heard rumours that Hope's Peak were looking to scout Jorge next year. As much as it pained him to admit it, Jonathan prayed that wouldn't be the case. If Jorge was indulged in his tendencies any further, Jonathan feared for his brother's life.

Another source of advice had strangely enough came from Dio Brando himself. The world was alight with interest in the male model and it was all but certain that Hope's Peak would make an effort to lure him back in after being rejected once. Jonathan had called hoping for news on Jorge and received the same answer as always.

"I can try to keep the worst away from him, but I can't do much about the people around him. Jojo," Dio had taken up Jonathan's nick-name with stunningly quick ease. "You need to know when to let detach from others. Jorge cannot be reached by any of us any longer. Surely it would be better to wait until he is shocked by the results himself?"

"I cannot do that, Dio." Jonathan had replied. "If something terrible happened to Jorge, an accident or otherwise, how would I be able to face him again? If I simply neglected others in pain because it would be too much work or pain for myself, how could I expect others to sacrifice the same for me? However much he may wish to deny me, when I try to bring him back to sanity, Jorge is my little brother and I have to protect him."

Dio had been amused but interested. He gave the same advice with the other members of Class 77-B; simply leave them to face their own consequences and focus on himself, lest he let them distract him from his goals. Jonathan could see the logic in what Dio had said, but couldn't agree. Strangely enough, his replies had somehow made Dio sound more interested than before.

Still, could Jonathan have followed Erina's advice?

"Jonathan, maybe you should try approaching them yourself. If it worries you this much, maybe you can find out why they don't wish to attend class." Erina advised, from behind a laptop screen. Soft yet firm eyes then turned to worry. "Although you should help this Mikan girl first. You make it sound like she lives life on the edge of tears every second."

It was good advice but, other than helping Miss Mikan stay stable, how could Jonathan have tracked down every last classmate and bring them together for more than a day? It seemed impossible.

Until he met the new teacher for Class 77-B. Miss Chisa Yukizome, who arrived in class to be horrified at the lack of attendance, and had already sworn to have everyone attend the class. Her methods seemed almost too much, pulling those knives on Fuyuhiko, but there was something about
The talk of reclaiming their youths! The words of their efforts combined creating hope! Of being more than their Talents! It was inspiring. It was invigorating. It was what he needed to hear.

He hadn't been shocked to know that Sonia latched onto the plan. What he had been shocked about was how quickly both they and some of the classmates had went with that flow. To want to share in that energy that Miss Yukizome emitted and join the others. Nekomaru, Kazuichi, Gundham, Miss Ibuki, Miss Chiaki and even Miss Peko herself. All of them simply needed the word.

That had been what they needed! An inspiring light to drive them forward. Yes, there had been some who needed to be moved. Jonathan didn't know how glad he should have felt that the task of manhandling a woman, even one as energetic as Miss Akane, fell to Nekomaru. Jonathan had hoped that she'd have been subdued in a less...brutal way. Yes, she seemed to enjoy the combat, but Jonathan had years of gentlemanly manners instilled in him and every last one of them told him to not fight a woman.

Defending their virtue was a much easier matter. He might have stepped in had Miss Yukizome not already punished Teruteru for his language. Plus, he had the creeping feeling that the Ultimate Chef might have responded in a way that he was nowhere near ready to cope with.

Mitarai had resisted, much swifter than his wide physique suggested, and Komaeda was almost too co-operative. There was something in his eyes that unnerved Jonathan. It wasn't a predator-like gaze in the Ultimate Luckster's eyes but something almost worse. The eyes of a cultist looking at their master.

But that might have just been Komaeda reacting to the energy that Miss Yukizome had been emitting.

At least the class was finally together and seemed to agree—however reluctantly—to attend regular class sessions from now on. Finally they could come together as schoolmates and help one another! Jonathan may have been a foreigner here, but even he could share in Miss Yukizome's smile.

Perhaps he could even form more friendships with them.

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And what friendships they were!

Just a few weeks since Class 77-B came together and they had already drawn closer together. There were bumps on the road with their...eccentricities, but Miss Chiaki's video games had helped to soothe over the edges between them. Friendly competition had proven to win the class over to one another. Even if he had been terrible at the boxing video game, he still had fun.

Not much else had changed. There were some random blood tests that Hope's Peak held for current students and potential applicants. It was probably something to do with an experiment by one of the upper-years. With the amount that Main Course students could get away with, it'd be no surprise to Jonathan if that were the case.

Other than that, Jonathan was enjoying the idyllic, if manic, school life that Hope's Peak now
The school itself was being watched for who their scouts visited. One name in particular was one
that Jonathan knew very well at this point. Dio Brando, rumoured to be accepted as the Ultimate
Male Model in the next year, had been mature about being in a lower-year to Jonathan.

Nekomaru was proof enough that age wasn’t a factor for Hope’s Peak and it was likely that the next
year would have someone even older than Dio in his year. At least, that was what Jonathan told Dio.

It was fascinating how much a person could change after a single trip. The thug Jonathan had tangled
with was now almost a gentleman in his own right. Erina’s warning of something being wrong with
Dio remained in his mind, but it didn’t stop him from approaching his friend with open arms.

Dio made it a policy to visit Hope’s Peak every time he was in Japan for a fashion show. Jonathan
took it as a chance to catch up and find out about where Dio had gone next.

It was not only Dio who Jonathan tried to catch up with but Erina as well. The love between them
had withstood the test of distance and Jonathan treasured every face-to-face meeting as if it was the
Holy Grail itself. Whenever the school had a holiday, Jonathan always gave himself time to visit
home and enjoy time with Erina and family.

Right now, however, he was busy explaining the differences between the Olympic and Professional
styles of boxing. The different number of judges, the way that points were counted, and the fact that
knocking the opponent out was a mistake in amateur boxing whilst it was the aim in professional
boxing, among other areas. He might have mentioned the use of head-gear, but it was being removed
anyway so why go into too much detail?

Miss Yukizome heard this and it was as if Jonathan was the teacher instead of her, the way that she
scribbled every detail down in her notebook. There was even a slight scowl on her face that might
have been called cute were she not his teacher. She had done this with every student but somehow
made each one feel special in their own way.

It was while the others were busy with Gundham’s animals that she finally asked about Erina.
Everyone knew that he had a girlfriend, but this was the first time that Miss Yukizome herself was
asking for details.

"Is she a cutie? How long have you been dating? What’s she like?" She asked. Each question was a
round from the machine-gun that was Miss Yukziome’s mouth. It was almost overwhelming.

"Miss Yukizome, you’re being a bit direct,” Jonathan said, having to lean back as Miss Yukizome
drew closer. His friends and classmates were starting to notice. As he had the space to speak,
however, Jonathan found his voice. “But yes, she is lovely. Somehow her personality is even
brighter than her looks. We met when we were just children and have been tied together ever since.
Eyes as gentle as water, a smile brighter than the sun itself, and a heart finer than all the riches in the
world.”

He took out a photograph of Erina from his jacket pocket and looked down on it. Just the sight alone
was enough to warm his heart! He smiled softly and tenderly stroked the edge, only to notice that
something had dripped on it. Was it rain? The skies above didn’t have a single cloud though!

It was only when he went to ask Miss Yukizome that he realised that the source of the drops were
the tears gushing down her face.
"That's so beautiful!" Miss Yukizome exclaimed as she wrapped her arms around Jonathan's body. It seemed impossible that someone like her could have a grip closer to a cobra's than a woman, yet Jonathan was still gasping for breath as she somehow swung him around. "I never thought I'd see this kind of passion in one of my students so early in their lives!"

That caught the attention of the class. Soon enough, everyone was asking about Erina and interrogating Jonathan about how long he had known her for and what their relationship was like. Teruteru and Miss Hiyoko, despite themselves, even resisted the urge to make inappropriate remarks when they saw how he looked when speaking of her.

"Miss Yukizome, you got anyone who makes your heart go all," Miss Ibuki then played a particular loud solo on her guitar. She likely intended it to represent the furious beating of the heart when in love.

"I do." Miss Yukizome replied, reaching a hand inside her apron and revealing a picture of her own. It looked like one of her student photos, her in the centre and dragging someone who Jonathan recognised as Sakakura and a silver-haired young man. The way she smiled at the latter told Jonathan all he needed to know. "Kyosuke can seem aloof to some, but that's more because of the burdens he has. When I'm with him, he's like the first snow in winter, almost too amazing to see and feel for yourself." Miss Yukizome then grabbed Jonathan's hands in her own and gave him a strong look. "Let's wish each other the best for our hearts."

"Y-Yes." Jonathan replied, taken aback by the determination in her words. He quickly found his own strength again. "Of course."

Beyond a bit of mild teasing from those like Fuyuhiko and Miss Mahiru, and a slight amount of delusional day-dreaming from Kazuichi over his chances with Miss Sonia, everyone had mostly given Jonathan good-wishes with Erina. It had warmed his heart to know that everyone was on his side.

With such good friends, and a woman like Erina waiting for him just as much as he yearned for her company again, the future ahead seemed bright.

Come out, dark clouds of the future! Nothing could mar Jonathan Joestar's future.

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So what is it that you are doing with my blood? Dio kept searching on the laptop, helpfully provided by the trustee snoring in the bed beside him. He had to restrain the urge to groan. It might have been worth seducing her for the sake of the information on this 'Izuru Kamukura Project', but it didn't mean he had to like it.

It wasn't just that, of course, but he was interested as well in just what they wanted his blood for. As far as he could tell, it was somewhat related to this plan to create 'The Ultimate Hope' out of nothing. The chance for mere humans to think themselves as Gods.

Dio had nothing but scorn for them. As if they could simply create a beacon of hope out of nothing more than pieces of humans and sticking them together. True Hope came from the individual's mastery of their fate. Hope was to move forward in life with certainty as to their goal. Not simply lay
down and accept some artificial saviour.

As if knowing that what made them unique could be copied would bring anything but despair. When Dio destroyed Hope's Peak and built it anew, a monument to his achievements, all would know this. But first he would need to spread his influence across the world and that required knowledge and entrance into Hope's Peak itself.

From what he had learnt, whatever plan they had for the DNA samples they took had been placed in reserve. Apparently they had a preference for using an existing human body rather than the risks of cloning and genetic acceleration. Project Haruno, however, had been placed in reserve in place the subject-Hajime something—passed away or the procedures failed somehow.

That was all that Trustee seemed to know. A sharp snort made Dio turn, fearing that the Trustee had woken up and would see him with her laptop, but it was only her snoring again. It was a small miracle that Dio merely seduced her enough to tire her before they truly engaged in sexual intercourse.

To have mated with someone so desperate to feel young again made his skin crawl.

"You think that I, Dio, am nothing more than a beggar yearning for entrance into your sanctum." Dio whispered to himself, glaring down at the woman. "But my body is a temple. You'll try and try and never find the treasure you seek."

Nothing like Dio himself. He slowly learnt more about the plans of the Izuru Kamukura Project, being pioneered by one 'Yasuke Matsuda' who supposedly knew a way to transfer the memory of a Talent from one person to another. The image of five golden arrows with a pattern on their heads, the image too blurry for him to make out which, intrigued him as well.

Had he seen that pattern once before?

Dio called his friend. The one who Fate ordained him to meet and help him rescue himself from becoming like Jorge Joestar, a wretch begging for the approval of floozies and hanger-ons. The sight almost made Dio regret promising Jojo to inform him on what Jorge was doing. But enough on the lowly fools in Dio's life.

Ever since the day they met, whenever Dio travelled to Japan, he made time to visit two people. To avoid the press and fans was always a challenge but one that was worth it for the time he spent with them. The first person he visited was always before the shows and drama emerged. The first ever true friend he had.

Their conversation was a friendly one, if with mutual gentle rebukes for forgetting certain promises made, and Dio let his friend vent on the difficulties in life before asking about a pattern he had seen. Was it something that his friend was familiar with? The styling seemed Ancient Egyptian.

When he was told no, Dio decided to take the question to Jonathan. The latter's interest in archaeology often extended to Egypt, if South America seemed to captivate him more, which would be more helpful to Dio.

"How are things on your end? You mentioned facing an issue before. Have you overcome it?" Dio asked, letting the voice of his friend bring him calm as it always did. After having to wear a mask for so long, it was better to be himself once more. "Good. Just as you always do. I'll be meeting you tomorrow. The security crackdown after that Kuzuryu girl's murder should have ended by now. It'll
be easier for us to meet."

The two said their goodbyes and Dio ended the call. It was good to speak with someone who he
didn't regard with contempt, as he did with so many in the world of fashion and modelling. A
collection of skeletons and leeches, as far as he was concerned. Just as it was with most people on
this planet. All in need of someone to guide them.

Jojo was different. At first, Dio merely befriended him to get close to the one who had dared strike
Dio and ready to smite him down when the time came. The perfect way to cut ties with his shameful
past, in ending the one who sent him scurrying away from England and towards his destiny.

Something changed. There was something about Jojo, from his personality to the very energy around
him, that lured Dio closer to him. It was as if the two were bound together by the threads of fate itself
to meet and grow closer to one another. To find that both excelled in many fields from boxing to
rugby to being in the peak physical condition for combat.

Jojo had gone from a mere long-term plot to someone who Dio considered to be in the top rungs of
humanity. No longer was he angered by the thought of Jojo matching him in fights, but he was
instead pleased that the opportunities of Hope's Peak were only enhancing him.

Even if Jojo was a giver, one who would put others before himself until the point of death, Dio could
appreciate the earnest soul. The hope he gave others, especially his classmates, had been strong
enough that it even reached Dio's own heart at times. It certainly reached his classmates as well.

For all Jojo claimed that it was mostly Chiaki, their chosen class representative or something, Jojo
himself had worked to keep his class together. One of his classmates, Komaeda, had been suspended
and their teacher lost to some bombing incident. The strength needed to keep everyone together was
awe-inspiring.

Had Dio not known Jojo better, he might have invited him to join Dio and his friend in bringing
Hope to the world. But it was not meant to be. Jojo would never understand the means required to do
so, and the necessary sacrifice of Class 77-B especially would make him fight to the end.

It would be useless to resist against Dio, but he had already accepted that Jojo would fight to the end.

*A shame. The fruits of our DNA will have to live on for you.* Dio mused to himself as he shut down
the laptop and moved to call Jojo.

He could at least enjoy the time they had together.

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In a world where Jorge Joestar, the potential Ultimate Horse-Rider, had never been shot, he would
have faced two fates. One where he would have been rescued from himself by his fellows in Class
78 and one where he would have died of drug overdose in an alleyway, abandoned by his date after
the first signs of cardiac arrest.

This is not that world.

This is the world where Jorge Joestar, after an argument with Lord George Joestar ending with the
latter saying he wished the former was never born, stormed off to a nightclub and was shot in the spine after cutting in line. This is the world where Jorge Joestar was told that he would never be able to walk again.

When Jonathan Joestar learnt of this tragedy, he was on the first plane back to England to visit his family and do all he could to help his brother. He welcomed the reunion with Erina but met her with tears running down both their faces. Not out of the passion of two lovers meeting each other once again. Instead, it was sorrow for the fate of one who they cared dearly for.

George Joestar, consumed with grief and guilt, had ensured that Jorge would have the finest conditions and surgeons working to save what they could. It was a fool's errand, but one he undertook nonetheless.

All three of them tried their best to reach Jorge, but where he had once been trapped in hedonism, now he was drowning in the black tar-pits of Despair. The one pure joy he had in his life was robbed from him, as was the ability to walk.

The tragedy struck the entire family. George Joestar aged five years in five days, Erina felt the guilt of a woman who wondered if she might have saved someone had she been sterner in her language, whilst Jonathan felt despair like none other. His brother had been destroying himself for so long and Jonathan had been celebrating in Japan?

Not since the death of Danny had Jonathan been so heart-broken.

For Dio Brando, Jorge's tragedy was nothing more than an inevitable annoyance. The boy's life-style condemned him to a miserable death so why not at least celebrate that he wasn't dead? Had Dio been robbed of his legs, it wouldn't have done anything to prevent him from reaching his destiny.

He knew why he had to offer a shoulder to cry on, but it grated regardless.

Still, it did have its benefits. For this very tragedy would be what would lessen Jonathan's guard and make him open fully to Dio Brando. To reveal the open heart and let his innate goodness show itself entirely to Dio. For even Dio could not resist the magnetic pull of Jonathan's Hope. It was on an entirely different level to what he had seen before.

The only thing to compare to was when Dio first attained peace of mind.

In turn, Dio revealed secrets about himself to Jonathan, swearing him to silence. He spoke of a poor and terrible childhood with a terrorised mother and an abusive drunk for a father. How he had been forced to fight for himself even when his father died and associates turned him into a male model for their own profit. How he himself was trapped in a cycle of self-loathing and debauchery.

He did not mention how he escaped it beyond saying he learnt peace of mind, but he did not have to. In a time where Jonathan feared for his brother's ability to face tomorrow, knowing that someone like Dio managed to rebuild himself gave him new hope.

The bond between the two grew stronger. For Jonathan, Dio had become a friend who he could trust just as much as he could with any of his beloved classmates. For Dio, Jonathan became a figure that he acknowledged to be worthy of admiration.

Indeed, that hope of his could even be a threat to Dio one day.
Dio stood and watched the fetal-positioned teenager floating in the giant cylinder-shaped pod. Bright green liquid blanketed the being from harm on the outside with likely bullet-proof glass. Project Haruno was just as secure as Izuru Kamukura had been from any intruders or figures other than the trustees.

Trustees like the one who Dio killed to enter this lab and take his prizes. The services of Izuru Kamukura, the Stand Arrows, and now the secrets of Project Haruno. The culmination of the DNA of Dio, Jojo, and others who had been judged as sufficient to create a new life all on their own.

Yet it had been hardly a year. How could cloning had progressed so far?

"Why is it that shape?" Dio asked. He turned his head towards the bloodied scientist on the floor next to him. He had only resisted for a moment, but he would die with the other scientists.

Kamukura had handled the cameras beforehand, but Dio himself would make sure there were no witnesses.

"The DNA samples merged together well enough. You and Joestar were extremely compatible, enough that only you two were needed for sufficient accelerated growth." The scientist blubbered the words out. Maybe he thought if he seemed pathetic enough, he would live. "Perfect physical and mental attributes for someone at this stage. You must be proud."

"Yes." Dio said to himself. The thought that not only was his and Jonathan's DNA enough to create a being worthy of every Talent, but that they surpassed the once-thought limits of humanity made his chest swell with pride. Not enough that he didn't smash the front of his boots against the jaw of the scientist. It only took a few stomps to finish him off. "Dispose of him."

The curt command was followed to perfection by Izuru. In a single minute, it was as if the room's occupants had simply vanished into thin air. Dio might have been impressed with anyone else. But to praise Izuru for being talented was like praising a toaster for creating toast, or a knife for being able to cut through flesh.

That was the difference between the artificial hope of Izuru Kamukura and the genuine hope of someone like Jojo.

Jojo's actions inspired others to go beyond themselves. His heart humanised him and made others wish to be like him or to do right by him. Jojo had the power to make people wish to be more than they were now. Izuru was simply a machine that could surpass humanity at the cost of his own. People looked at him and would be dispirited at how their Talents could be mimicked.

People would see Izuru and wonder why even bother to ache their necks looking up to the sky.

Maybe that difference was why Dio was sat by one of the monitors, typing in a password he tortured out of one of the scientists, and found himself facing a certain file. A file that would input memories and commands into Project Haruno. Nothing more than a puppet for the whims of the Steering Committee.

They'd have turned a child of Dio into a slave.
No. Haruno was the name these fools would have given him. Dio would give him a name for is own. A name that suited the heir to the legacy of Dio Brando, and for a name of Jonathan Joestar. He could give that much to someone who he respected.

"So, Giorno. You are the son of I, Dio, and Jojo." Dio began to think about all he found. On this very computer, he could give Giorno Talents. With the Stand Arrows he had Izuru take for him, he could give Giorno a power that no human could match. "I could give you power unlike any other. I could make you into a God, the only being that could match Jojo and I together."

He would not give him all the Talents. Izuru's existence was proof of the dangers of that. A man without desire was neither human nor God, but a blank slate with a face and voice. Neither would Dio make the commands on the laptop too complex. Merely passing on the goal of the father to the son himself.

Reach the top of the world, Giorno. By any means necessary to you.

But it wouldn't have to be like Dio. Giorno wouldn't have to live on the streets like a rat, gathering coins to buy liquor for a tyrant, nor have to kowtow and dance like a monkey for food and drink. Dio could turn his son into a fine prince within a matter of days, at this rate. He could give his son the start he never had. Just think of where he, Dio, could have been had he not wasted over ten years of his life as a rag-wearing child?

What would he have been like?

"...But what would you say to that Dio? The Dio that never knew your suffering. Only of wealth and success. Would you admire the you who was an inheritor?"

His friend's words had first confounded Dio into silence when he heard them. A minor dispute that forced Dio to contemplate the very upbringing he had. If he had been a child who never knew pain nor loss, would he have gained his thirst for riches and glory? Would he have been motivated to reach the top if he never knew what rock-bottom felt like?

Dio had changed his mind. His son would live away from him, albeit with an identity and account of his own to give him a fighting chance. By the looks of the reports, Giorno's biological age was around fourteen. He would be fifteen by the time that Dio would ascend to the top. By the time that he would draw the final curtain on the old world.

Giorno would live never knowing who his father was and would not know the comforts of wealth, when Dio would release him into the world, but one free of the lethargy and corruption that had turned Jojo's brother into a lout who needed crippling to regain his senses. He would be a son worthy of Dio.

Thus all Dio did was type in a final command to Giorno and put faith in the fact that too many would be worried about the Stand Arrows to think about a back-up like Project Haruno. Even if that wasn't the case, it was too close to completion for them to try and alter a command close enough to what they wanted from him.

As Dio left the lair where Hope's Peak were creating false gods in human shape, he thought to himself about Jojo once more.

To think that it only took their genes combined to create someone like Giorno. The man was nothing like the inheritors that Dio had spent his life hating and having to cater to. Somehow he had
developed the character and strength needed to earn the respect of Dio Brando. It was astounding.

Was it the work of Fate that both Dio and Jojo would be brought together? The two were like magnets, the fact that they were opposites was what drew the two of them together, but there must have been something more to it. It was enough to make Dio ponder the workings of fate for the first time in years.

There was one thing he knew, however, and that was that the time was coming for Dio to rise. In a matter of weeks, the old world would end and the new world, Dio's world, would rise from the ashes.

A part of him hoped that Jojo might actually be a part of it. That he wouldn't have to burn his friend with the world.

If not, then it would be a worthy sacrifice.

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"Chiaki, stay close to me." Jonathan pulled Chiaki behind him and looked around the dark chamber. The door behind had just shut and locked itself and he couldn't shake the creeping sensation against his spine. "What's even happening here? Why would you lead us here, Miss Yukizome?"

Jonathan had never imagined that today would be like this. The Reserve Course had been rioting outside, the Class were trying to find Mikan on the returning Komaeda's advice, and had been fruitless in their search. It had only been when Chiaki returned with an injured Komaeda in her arms, with news of Peko's capture and Miss Yukizome staying behind to try and save her, that Jonathan began to wonder if the recent deaths and Mikan's kidnapping were unrelated.

It was a small miracle that Mikan herself had arrived, Peko in her arms, having spoken of how she escaped from the lair of this Mastermind. That had been when the identity of this villain had been revealed to them. A truth that Jonathan had found it hard to believe.

Dio Brando. The man who had seemingly changed from the rogue he once was and became a model citizen. The man who comforted Jonathan during the dark days of Jorge's shooting. The man who was apparently behind this whole tragedy. Somehow, he had kidnapped Mitarai (the one they knew actually being someone else entirely) and was planning on spreading despair across the planet.

If only Jonathan had been like Erina! He should have kept Dio at an emotional distance. Ended any chance of a bond at that party. But he let Dio into his life and maybe even gave him the chance to meet the Ultimate Animator and hold him prisoner. The chance to learn of Class 77-B and snatch away Mikan and the others.

It had been at that moment that there was no other option than to rescue Miss Yukizome. Neither Jonathan nor his classmates could do anything else. Komaeda had warned them that they faced an enemy and power far beyond them, but even he was won over by their unity.

The entire class rallied forth towards the underground lair where Dio waited for them. The Reserve Course rioters had tried to intercept them but Gundham and Nekomaru insisted on being the ones to hold them off. They told Jonathan that he would need to lead them forward. It made logical sense, as the one who knew Dio best out of all of them.
But the shame of leaving them behind! Jonathan inwardly told himself to make it up to them later, when he got Chiaki and Miss Yukizome out of here.

Whatever Dio did to Mikan was unforgivable. She had thrown both he and Chiaki, during a moment of surprise, down a hole of some kind and they tumbled down to a corridor of some sorts. Initial relief at finding Miss Yukizome turned into them following her towards wherever it was she had been leading them.

That place was apparently here. A large but dark room with a circular floor plan and multiple doors leading to somewhere. There was nothing inside of it bar the ceiling lights and television monitors, as if there was to be an audience among the higher areas of the room.

"Chiaki, Jojo..." Miss Yukizome's voice trailed off as she kept her back to them. She was standing in a slight slouch, making Chiaki move against Jonathan's softening grip towards her. "You two really are the beacons of hope for our class. Chiaki, you brought and kept everyone together. Jojo, you inspire them to keep fighting for their dreams and to keep hope in their hearts. The two of you together can really help those kids overcome anything."

Just as she finished that sentence, and Chiaki took another step closer, Miss Yukizome shot around in a twirl with a gleam in her hand. Jonathan barely pulled Chiaki back in time to avoid the knife cutting any deeper than the jacket. Had he not moved in time, Chiaki's front would have been drenched in oozing blood.

"M-Ms Yukizome! What's the meaning of this?" He screamed. What could have made his teacher do such a terrible thing?

"He said he'd reward me." She replied, the knife in her hand shaking and body rubbing against itself. "If I win this fight, the Ultimate Master will show me favour." Drool began to drip from the sides of Miss Yukizome's mouth. "The Despair of killing you two, just for that kind of thing...kya!"

Jonathan was scared. What had happened to the Miss Yukizome he knew? The woman who wanted to help her students in any way she could? The woman who seemed to love everything about Hope's Peak and the people in it? She had been replaced by someone else.

That person was somehow in the heights of pleasure whilst also having tears run down her eyes. The eyes themselves had changed to a distinctive swirling pattern, blacks lines infinitely going on and on within a white background. This person who replaced Miss Yukizome was not going to hesitate to kill.

*What did Dio do to you?* Jonathan's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the ceiling lights turning on one by one. The whole room was bathed in light and it was only then that Jonathan realised exactly what this room was meant for.

It was meant to be a battlefield.

"Jojo!" Dio's voice echoed throughout the room as the door directly opposite the one Jonathan slammed open. Dressed in a regal purple jacket over a white shirt, Dio Brando manically grinned at both Jonathan and Chiaki. "You come into my fortress and expect that I, Dio, would not have prepared counter-measures?"

"Dio! What did you do to Miss Yukizome?" Jonathan snapped. Finding out why Dio was doing this
would come later, right now he had to find out how he could save his teacher.

"That's not even the pebble on top the mountain of my deeds." Dio replied, stretching his arms out, revealing the magnitude of his sins. "The one who revealed the truth about Izuru Kamukura, the one who slew the Student Council, the one who rallied the Reserve Course to march on Hope's Peak, the one who shall burn this world and build it anew under my rule," Dio's right arm moved back to his side so that he could point a thumb towards his face. "You thought this Ultimate Master was a villain in the dark, but it was I, Dio!"

"You won't get away with this." Chiaki spoke up from beside Jonathan. The way Dio then looked at her made Jonathan ready himself to throw her behind him. "When our friends get here-

Dio replied with a snap of his fingers. The television monitors between the ceiling lights flickered on and revealed the rest of their classmates all together. Gundham and Tanaka appeared unharmed, thankfully, but there was something off about all of them. None of them moved from their places, even as they seemed to be reacting to see Jonathan, Chiaki, and their teacher with Dio.

As if something was forcing them to remain still.

"It is time for us to begin the final round of this game." Dio skulked forward until he was right beside Miss Yukizome. He tilted his head slightly and gave a scornful aside glance. "Woman, ready yourself."

"Yes, Lord Dio." Miss Yukizome replied, entering a stance suited for a knife fight. She looked at Chiaki as if she was a piece of fresh meat.

"Jojo, I won't take the joy in doing this that I have taken in many of my deeds this past week. If I didn't know you better, I'd have tried to win you over to my side. But you will never agree to my world, not least because of the costs. This won't be much fun." Dio said, before entering a boxing stance of his own. "A two-on-two fight to the death! Your teacher and I will fight against you and the Ultimate Gamer until the victors are left standing! If you win, your class will be free to live their own lives. If we win, your classmates will join Yukizome and Tsumiki in being nothing more than the building-blocks for my destiny!"

"N-no." Chiaki said, speaking for the two of them. Fight Dio and Miss Yukizome to the death? Jonathan would do anything to protect his close ones, but to kill one of them? "Y-you can't be seri-

Miss Yukizome took advantage of Chiaki's horror and moved in quickly. The blade in her hand was the exact same as the one she used to intimidate Fuyuhiko when she first met the class. Jonathan now doubted she ever intended to use it on him beyond bluffing. Now she was trying to stab Chiaki without remorse.

Jonathan was too quick, however, and he grasped her wrist with his hand. The blade stopped just inches from Chiaki, who moved behind him for protection. "Ms Yukizome! You have to control yourself. Do you realise that you almost killed Chiaki?! I don't know how Dio is making you do this, but you have to fight it." He begged.

It seemed as if his words at least reached her. The tears ran down quicker, a sure sign that this act was only bringing her despair, and her whole body shook. Yet why she was smiling?

"Worry about your own opponent, Jojo!" Jonathan felt a fist slam against the right side of his face. He couldn't keep a grip on Miss Yukizome and felt one of his molars almost detach from his jaw. "If
you ever wish to see Erina ever again, then you must climb over our corpses to do it!"

What's even happening? Why are we having to partake in this cruel, bizarre, despairing fight? Jonathan dodged Dio's next strike, aimed right at his chest, and felt a certain set of papers crumpling against his chest. No matter what, he couldn't let any harm befall either Chiaki or the papers in his jacket pocket. He'd sacrifice his own body first. Ms Yukizome is being controlled by Dio. If I want to see everyone again. My classmates, Father, Jorge, Erina, all of them, I have to end Dio here and now!

Jonathan threw everything he had in this battle. The boxing skills he learnt over the years, the fighting styles that those like Nekomaru, Akane, and Peko showed him, and all the hard work that blessed him with his body. The thought of his classmates in danger drove him forward. The fear of what happened to Miss Yukizome happening to the others made him swifter than ever before.

The strikes that he couldn't dodge were simple bared forth as Jonathan found himself winning the battle of strikes. When he wasn't having to protect Chiaki, that is. The Ultimate Gamer had never had to truly fight for her life before and had no weapon of her own. Miss Yukizome, on the other hand, had clearly learnt something from both Sakakura and Munakata in fighting.

He was slowly building up wounds having to fight two battles at once. Dio alone was already making serious damage to Jonathan's mid-section, but there were many times where a blow he might have blocked had to be accepted to save Chiaki's eye or ear. Five minutes passed and already Jonathan's body was covered in bruises and cuts.

Dio, on the other hand, had no sign of damage on him. Every blow that Jonathan struck seemed to simply fade away after a mere second. Not only that, but Dio's blows were somehow adding more force behind them. It was as if the mountain Jonathan was climbing was growing faster than he could climb up it. It was enough to make him doubt himself.

Could he truly defeat Dio? Would he keep Chiaki safe from harm when she herself was being covered in knife wounds of varying size? Would they ever see their classmates again?

Jonathan decided to simply have faith and charge forth. If he gave into despair now, he would simply die here, and Dio would enjoy mastery over the fates of his classmates and teacher. There was no chance that he could allow such a thing! Jonathan thus fought on with all his might, summoning strength and power unknown before, if only to push Dio back. If only to give Chiaki a chance to escape.

As hope and determination kept him standing and fighting where his body yearned to surrender, Jonathan took pleasure in knowing that Dio himself was growing frustrated. Every blow he was able to strike, even those Jonathan thought he dodged, was failing to bring Jonathan down. He may have put up a strong act as well, but Jonathan knew his own blows were at least bringing pain.

It was that anger that backfired! Dio's temper drove him to make a reckless strike aimed at gouging out Jonathan's eye itself. A telegraphed upper-cut like that could easily be sidestepped and leave Dio open for a final devastating blow.

There! Now's my chance! Jonathan's right hook carried not only his spirit, but the hopes of everyone. From Chiaki, to Miss Yukizome who Jonathan knew was fighting inside, to the rest of Class 77-B who were screaming for him to triumph, and from everyone who Dio had wronged. The fist made contact with the side of Dio's face, landing just next to his eye.
Dio's head shot to the left as that very eye went out of its socket and broke from his skull. Dio howled in agony as he shot up a hand to cover up the bleeding hole where his eye had once been. This was it. Justice had won the day!

"This is it, Dio! The knock-out blow!" Jonathan readied himself for a powerful blow to the centre of Dio's face. The hope of his friends poured from the monitors and flooded the room. Dio's face flashed from pain to smugness, but then became strangely furious. He wonder why-

Chiaki's scream was heard over the sensation of something piercing through Jonathan's back. It hadn't touched his spine, but it was close enough that he could feel his bones scrap against the intrusive metal. Jonathan creaked his head behind to find that the culprit was a smiling yet tearful Miss Yukizome.

Jonathan was frozen in shock as she yanked out the blade and the energy keeping him upright left with the knife. Jonathan stumbled onto the ground and felt the mood of the room change. The monitors now showed pictures of a class in despair. Jonathan ignored the soft growl from somewhere and tried to give the class a sign that he still lived. That there was still hope.

"Jojo...I always rooted for you and Erina. Just like you rooted for me and Kyosuke. Two pure loves." Miss Yukizome walked slowly towards Jonathan, knife scraping against the floor. He could just barely see her face, wreathed in pleasure and despair. "And now I'm discarding both for Lord Dio. Aaah, this despair. It's rocking through to my core. All the pleasure centres in my brain are screaming as loud as my heart, but in joy to its pain. You see this knife? With it, I'm going to slowly peel you apart and chop every part of-"

She was cut off by the back of Dio's hand slamming against her cheek. Miss Yukizome was sent flying towards the floor.

"Silence, woman! You dared interfere in Jojo's final battle!" Dio's roar was something to behold. Even more so when he revealed that his face was entirely healed; it was as if Jonathan had never struck him in the first place. "To have ridden me of my eye, even whilst protecting his comrade. Such ability. Such honour. Jojo will die, woman, but it will be by my hand and mine alone! It will be quick and painless! Go play with Nanami, for all I care, but leave Jojo out of it."

"To think Lord Dio is treating my beloved student with more respect than I am." Miss Yukizome replied, softly moaning to herself as she forced herself up.

Jonathan could only lay there in horror as Miss Yukizome moved to strike at Chiaki. This was not a fight but a torture session. Chiaki tried to reason with her only to be hit in the chest with a left knee. Miss Yukizome wasn't even using knives anymore as she landed blow after blow on Chiaki. Jonathan began to crawl forward, whilst also trying to stem the bleeding, if he didn't have the strength to stand anymore.

Anything to stop this cruelty!

"You're perhaps wondering how it is that I, Dio, was healed?" Dio asked, standing behind Jonathan. His voice lost its usual bluster, spirits apparently dampened by what Miss Yukizome did. "That is the power of my spirit, Jojo. There are many things I could explain, but time works against us there. Just know that Holy Diver is the world's greatest Stand, Jojo, but even it has limitations." Dio sighed. "Your wound doesn't look fatal, but enough to weaken you. I wanted this to end poetically, but I suppose this will do."
That moment of pity was all Jonathan needed to act. With the hand on the wound, Jonathan turned so that it was his back against the floor now and used that momentum to fling blood droplets at Dio's eyes. Temporarily blinded, there was nothing he could do to stop Jonathan from stumbling forwards to Chiaki.

"Useless!" A voice barked as something, neither Dio nor Miss Yukizome, struck Jonathan's side. The pain turned his vision white and did nothing to numb Jonathan's senses against the next blow. "Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless!"

The chorus of insults hummed in Jonathan's ears as he was struck again and again. Another pair of fists and legs joined in the assault as Dio apparently regained his sight and moved to take his revenge. Jonathan could have withstood the pain, terrible as it was, if it weren't for the sight of Chiaki being subjected to the same tortures as him. Was this their end?

No! I can't let it end like this! I won't let Dio kill her. I won't let him hurt my friends. I won't let him take away our futures! Jonathan felt a new strength within him. A fire in his gut that became a raging inferno as only two words echoed throughout his mind. The World!

Everything around him stopped. Jonathan was confused by many things, not least the giant knightly figure caked in white light behind him or the demon just inches from punching his gut, but he could not let curiosity get the better of him! Jonathan moved to try and push Chiaki towards the door that Dio came from, only for the knightly figure to shoot ahead of him and shove her ahead for him.

The world around him became normal and Jonathan quickly realised that, whatever happened, it had gotten Chiaki away from Miss Yukizome. That, and the knight and demon were still in the room. Was this what Dio meant when he mentioned 'Holy Diver' and 'Stands'?

"Run! Chiaki, you have to get away!" Jonathan screamed as he crawled forward towards her. Dio's fist against his chest took the wind out from his lungs and he felt the bones of his ribs crack under the pressure.

"How? How did you manifest a Stand without the use of the Arrow?" Dio asked, his face doing nothing to hide the horror and shock he seemed to be feeling. "Could it be? Was it your very determination and drive that created this Stand? Its abilities as well, either teleportation or...the power to stop time!" The despair slipped away from Dio's face and was replaced with an almost child-like joy. Dio's laugh echoed across the room. "Only you, Jojo! Only you could have had a Stand whose power could truly match Holy Diver's, without desecrating the body and mind themselves!"

Jonathan paid little attention to Dio, however, when he saw Miss Yukizome follow after Chiaki. She was even going intentionally slowly, as Chiaki struggled to force Dio's door open, to bait her in. He struggled to get closer closer. If this 'The World' could do what Jonathan imagined, maybe he could restrain Miss Yukizome in time.

He extended a hand towards Miss Yukizome. "I...have to...stop..."

"Jojo," Dio's voice, too soft to be bravado, cut Jonathan off. It was only now that the Ultimate Boxer was realising just what condition his body was in. "Before, I had hoped to collect a sample of you. That perhaps your noble spirit would see the world I create and understand its beauty in another form. But that's not meant to be. Your belief in your friends is too strong to ever accept the sacrifices. Killing you won't be enough, especially with that Stand of yours potentially coming back to haunt me."
Looking at this 'Holy Diver', Jonathan noticed the dark energy pooling by its raised right fist. The energy felt off. As if it was not of this world and all those that even came near it would be infected by its unearthly nature. Even by the standards of seeing these muscular figures fighting beside people like himself and Dio, this miasma was something else.

Jonathan tried to force himself back but it was not meant to be. His body was simply too battered and injured. Dio and Holy Diver's tantrum had caused too much damage to his legs and what little energy he had left would be wasted in getting a few inches away from Dio. He could use 'The World', but that would buy him a handful of seconds at the most.

It might have brought him despair to know that nothing he could do would stop his classmates from weeping and screaming from the room they were in. Doing all they could to try and turn their hope for Jonathan and Chiaki's survival into some kind of energy for them. To know that Chiaki would have to out-run Miss Yukizome to survive.

Jonathan felt paper crumple against his jacket pocket, somehow unstained by all the blood, and his eyes widened.

"Know the power of Holy Diver. The power fuelled by those slain by my hand, Jojo. The power to erase those who challenge me from existence." Dio said, quiet enough that only the two of them would ever hear those words spoken with a mournful undercurrent. Dio's expression then shifted to a mad joyful gleam as Holy Diver moved to strike down. "Goodbye, Jojo!"

The letters. The letters he wrote with such care and emotion only last week, yet never had the courage to actually send out of fear. His last visit to England had only been a few weeks ago and so much had happened. Words exchanged with his father on his future. Words and deeds with Erina that could not be taken back. Arguments with Jorge that needed to be resolved.

He couldn't let those letters be erased. If he was doomed to never see his family again, he could at least have hope that they would have one final message from him.

If only he had The World sooner. He understood so little about the knightly figure with which he only had for a minute and a half, and yet he sympathised with it. To only exist for such a short time. He had little time for much else as the Stand ripped through his jacket and plucked the three letters and threw them aside. They went far away from Holy Diver's reach.

Two seconds passed and time resumed. Holy Diver's fist slammed against the centre of Jonathan's chest and he felt the miasma seep into his body itself. The dark energy meeting with his own and somehow merging in with it. Slowly devouring and absorbing it. Yet that act of consumption only caused the miasma to destroy itself just as much as it did with Jonathan.

Matter was replaced by blinding lights that soon cloaked his entire body as reality itself seemed to warp and turn into a spiral of sorts. So this was what it felt like to be erased from reality itself? It was a strangely painless sensation.

Jonathan had only seconds to remain and yet time itself slowed down. He had been in many boxing matches where a second became a minute for him, when the tension and intensity became too much for even his own mind. This was no different. Or maybe this was simply how death was.

Jonathan first noticed the tears running down Dio's eyes and had wondered if something happened that Dio hadn't expected, or undermined his plans. Only by turning his head did he realised that Dio was in fact weeping at the pieces of paper in Holy Diver's hands. Specifically, the letters that
Jonathan had cast aside for their own safety.

"Jojo...you might have taken a chance to risk it all on striking me. But instead you saved these letters?" Dio asked. There was only gentleness in his voice as he read out the name of the intended recipient. "'Erina', 'Jorge', 'Father'. You put them before yourself?" Dio's voice shook. The moment itself had caused him to become choked with tears as he turned back to Jonathan. "Jonathan Joestar. You never ceased to amaze me. I, Dio, declare you the Ultimate Hope of the old world! Its finest virtues; forced to be destroyed for the sake of Heaven!"

If that was what Dio judged to be a respectful eulogy, Jonathan would not stop him. Or rather he could not stop him. But he had long reached the point where Dio no longer mattered in himself.

No. What happened was the regrets that Jonathan had. After all this time, and all the strength he had, he could do nothing to save Chiaki. He could only lay there and perish as his classmates were being turned into Dio's slaves, and did nothing as Miss Yukizome was corrupted. He would never be able to re-connect with Jorge. He would never speak with Father again. Worst of all, he would never see Erina again.

Even his final message to his family relied on Dio's sense of mercy.

That was when it hit him. As Jonathan slowly became fully covered in light and was being erased from reality itself, he found himself with an opportunity no other human would experience. He saw through the fabric of time-space and could see with complete certainty the path of the future.

Jonathan saw visions of Despair first. The death of Chiaki without seeing their friends again. Chisa Yukizome becoming a slave to Dio in spreading misery to all; butchered children, corrupting her lover, and spreading despair within the Future Foundation itself. He saw his beloved classmates sell their souls and future to Dio. Millions would die to their warped worship of Dio and the survivors would curse their names for all eternity.

Beyond Hope's Peak, he saw his Father ageing ten years in ten days and soon passing away from a broken heart.

He saw Erina all alone and in a funeral dress normally too large for her as they would bury him without a body. All before she'd have to flee their home to the rampaging hordes of Ultimate Despair. Jorge himself sinking deeper into his depression, ashamed of his final words to Jonathan, unable to know of how Jonathan had always forgiven him.

It was just then, right when Jonathan almost faced his demise with despair, that the visions of Hope came by. Jonathan saw a new hero rise up against Dio. He saw Class 78, Dio's very own class, rebel against the barbaric ceremony he designed for them. He saw them use the power Dio thought he alone had access to and used it to overthrow him.

Jonathan saw his classmates free themselves, if it hadn't been their original intention, as the one who had lost his humanity for infinite Talent reclaimed it once more. He saw how this stranger was the one who destroyed the power he held over their Fate.

He saw Erina strong and proud, raising a family of her own, with Jonathan always in her heart as she was within his own. He saw a copy of Dio, yet nothing like the man himself, in Italy fighting against a cursed fate and evil in the name of justice and hope. He saw Jorge, after years of tragedy and depression, overcome those very troubles and become the man who he was always meant to be.
The bright light of Hope extinguished the dark clouds of Despair. That was enough for him.

_Everyone. I'm sorry to leave you when your lights will shine so brightly._ Jonathan smiled to himself. His final act before being completely erased from reality. _But I know you will overcome the despair of my death. The despair of Dio Brando. I don't know if we'll meet in the afterlife, but I know you'll carry my will in your hearts._

_It was a bizarre thing; being friends with you all. But those were bonds I'll always treasure._

_Father, I'll see you soon. Jorge, you'll become a man greater than you could ever imagine, no matter how broken you think you are. Erina, I'm sorry to leave you now, but please, don't live a life of sorrow._

_Goodbye._

And so, Jonathan Joestar was erased from existence. All who witnessed this event wept. The friends who put their faith in the man who never lost hope, as they fell into despair, the class representative who felt the loss of a dear comrade and fought on to preserve his legacy, the teacher who took a sick joy within her corrupted mind, and even his killer. The man whose fate had become intertwined with Jonathan's in his climb towards Heaven.

To a choir of despair-filled tears, Jonathan Joestar was no more.

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In front of the old building of Hope's Peak Academy, the final refuge for the last beacons of hope for the world before Dio's reign, there stood two men who gazed down at a tiny stone slab that spouted from the ground. At any other time, it might have been a stone spot marring the view of the Hope's Peak courtyard. Something for the cleaners to remove.

Now? It was a befitting image for a barren wasteland that had forgotten life. The air itself was foul, though not poisonous enough that it would cause death. If Dio and his friend spent too long outside without protection, though, their lungs would not appreciate it one bit. Dio's own lungs were beginning to feel heavier than they had before.

The southern winds had blown some of the purer gases towards the Academy, and it was only getting stronger, but still Dio stood. It was a moment of silence for the former Ultimate Hope that he deserved. A tribute for the man who Dio had deemed worthy of calling friend.

_Holy Diver could remove the sickness in his lungs. It could do nothing for Jojo's death._

"I'll build him one in the appropriate size," Dio said to himself. He looked down at the memorial with the disdain it deserved. "Not this hovel that they made."

"They didn't have time for much else, Dio," His friend replied, the disapproving tone muffled by the gas-mask he wore. His Stand couldn't protect him from the outside world, so he needed all the protection he could get. "If you wanted a memorial now, you shouldn't have let Souda poison the air until you were inside the building."

"Perhaps." Dio conceded. He hadn't decided if he was displeased about them making the attempt at
all, if he was being honest.

It was a small stone slab barely large enough to fit in the many lines that Ultimate Despair had carved into them. They had even attached pieces of wood to the stone itself to make room for more messages, apparently having been a first-come-first-serve basis. No great tribute beyond a few simpering messages.

They had obviously put their hearts into it, or whatever was left of them. The tear marks staining the wood had been evidence enough for that. For all that Dio had pushed them into the pits of despair and zealotry, they had still loved Jojo as their classmate. That natural personality and power within him was strong enough that it even survived brainwashing.

Almost a worthy legacy in its own right. But Dio did Jonathan one better. As the world burnt to the Ultimate Despairs, Dio's classmates sat unconscious in pods having their memories erased, and Dio and his friend stood by the memorial, another part of his legacy was acting right now. Shortly after Jojo's death, Dio worked in the shadows to release their son and send him to his destiny.

Giorno was in Italy as they spoke. Just like the rest of the world, that place was falling into anarchy and chaos. The crime family Passione was even extending its reach and operations to the point where you could call Italy a mob-state. Criminal families all dividing it up into little fiefdoms as if they were the Italian states again.

If Giorno was truly Dio's son, he would rise above the trash and scum and assert himself, even if he looked only fifteen years old.

As any son of mine would. Dio smiled to himself as he imagined Giorno crushing those before him. His Stand alone, whatever it was, must be a thing of absolute terror when its lineage included Holy Diver and Jonathan's Stand. He wondered what his friend would have said if Dio hadn't erased his soul. With my drive, and your open-heart, Jojo, our son might have reached the heights of this world on his own. That is, if I, Dio, had not beaten him to it already.

Another minute of silence passed before Dio knew the two of them would have to part. Dio had to make arrangements to begin the Mutual Killing Game, the trial that would see the world fall into despair, while his friend needed to hide out until the right moment. To find sanctuary and stay there and let the madness pass by.

"You really should be wearing a mask. This isn't good for your lungs." Dio could only chuckle at his friend's paranoia. It was like he thought Dio would slip away into nothingness if he let him.

"Do you still believe that I, Dio, fear the work of those under me? Any damage can be healed by Holy Diver, my friend. No poison gas can stop that." Dio replied, which at least made his friend shuffle awkwardly in place. It almost made Dio laugh when a question came to him. All mirth left him. "Do you think he would have appreciated the world we will create?" He asked, so quiet that his friend barely heard it.

"I know he would. Jonathan Joestar wanted a kinder world, the world that we'll build from the ashes of this flawed one. He might have fought against yo-us, but we wanted the same thing." Looking to the eye, Dio could see the light bursting from his friends eyes from behind the mask. "A world of Hope."

Dio softly smiled. Who could have imagined that in a world that defied hope so much, so many would be dedicated to ignoring what had to be done to achieve it? Who would have thought that he'd
have met the person who would bring him peace of mind and aid him in creating Heaven?

He gave one final look at the memorial. There had been no body to bury but everyone in Class 77-B, barring the deceased Chiaki Nanami, treated even the name 'Jojo' with a reverence that almost rivalled that which they showed to Dio. The Ultimate Master who ruled them and the Ultimate Hope that had to be destroyed to teach them their place in the world.

His friend must have thought it was a sign that even the most despair-filled creatures could feel hope. Dio personally saw it as the last scraps of humanity in a pack of animals, but knew how his friend would feel about hearing that.

So he instead read the messages that his servants made for their beacon.

*Shout out to Ibuki's biggest fan, JoJo! I'm gonna make the whole world happy with my music!*  
*Staying true to my heart, just like you said!*  

*You might have liked that pig, but my dance will always carry your memory.*  

*I'll take pictures with all my heart. Just like you approached every day.*

*My country. No, the world itself, will know absolute peace under Lord Dio's rule. The drive I saw in you will push me onwards!*  

*Who could have thought that a being of light could have been a fine comrade to a demon like myself? JoJo, you were truly one in ten million! The Devas of Destruction weep at your absence!*  

*Just you wait, Jojo! Air pollution's gonna be a thing of the past!*  

*Every time someone takes one of my medicines, I'll be thinking of you just as much as I do Lord Dio. Thank you for being so nice to me.*  

*You always were a nice guy—though too nice man, could have gone all-out on me from the start!—so I'll keep you in my heart while I'm eating my fill.*  

*You were right, Jojo. I'm going to lead the Kuzuryu down the right path this time. I'll do it with Peko. X*  

*I'll feed the world! No one will know hunger again in Lord Dio's paradise.*  

*I'll be whoever I want to be. Just like you were.*  

*If I can inspire people even a tenth the amount you inspired me...I'll truly be the Ultimate Coach!*  

*Jojo, you were a shining light of Hope for us all. You may have died to create an Ultimate Despair unlike any other, but that light of yours will show again! And it'll be brighter than you ever were, as the Ultimate Ho—*

The message, written on a rotten piece of wood already falling apart, was lost to the ages as Dio's foot smashed against the wooden plank. It turned to splinters under the force of his blows, the other attached wooden boards shaking from the force of the attack. He'd have used Holy Diver, but he already decided to preserve the rest as a tribute to Jojo.
Nagito Komaeda. The worm that still latched onto the idea that Dio Brando could be stopped by some magic force embodied in a man. Even Fuyuhiko's tool had left a more respectful message with the two slashes forming an x-shape on the stone itself. Komaeda's punishment would be a brutal one when Dio was finished with his own classmates.

"Remind me to punish Komaeda when I get out. The wine of victory may blind me to what needs to be done." Dio commanded. He could trust his friend on this, but the rage still bubbled inside him.

"To mock someone's grave like that." His friend muttered, shaking his head in disappointment. He let Dio's anger flow out from him before asking whatever seemed to be on his mind. "Will you leave a message, Dio? I know it might seem awkward, but weren't you friends?"

Dio thought about that. They were friends, weren't they? Jonathan might have rejected Dio, had he known what was being planned all along, but that did not mean that the feelings Dio had when they spoke and bonded were not real. It was a bizarre friendship filled with lies and deceit, but a friendship nonetheless.

In fact, Jonathan Joestar was the second person that Dio ever truly called a friend.

Holy Diver emerged into existence and crouched down to the face the stone slab. It was a sign of good fortune for Dio that the centre of the stone remained untouched by the others and that there was enough room to write a message. The Stand used its claw fingers to slowly etch an epitaph worthy of someone like Jojo.

*Here lies Jonathan Joestar.*

*A friend of Dio.*

It would be the first thing that Dio would see when leaving this building as the Ultimate Master. The man who conquered humanity would be reminded of the sacrifices he had to make to reach that point. A fitting end to the legacy of Hope's Peak Academy. The fall of the institution coinciding with the end of its brightest lights.

"Jojo. Your light will shine on." Dio said to himself, putting a hand on the stone. He let his hand move against the texture of the rock. "When I build Heaven."

Thus, Dio stood and turned his back on the grave itself. Nothing else needed to be said between him and his friend. They would meet each other again when this was all over and they would celebrate together when the new world would be born. When all of humanity would learn peace of mind.

That was he took the first step back into the building. A flash came to his eyes! Images rushed into his mind, almost too fast for him to recognise, but he swore he could have seen Makoto Naegi, the Ultimate Luckster of his class, standing against Dio with a look of determination in his eyes. Wreathed in a white-gold aura, he was even challenging Dio himself!

For a brief moment, Dio hesitated. Only the sounds of Holy Diver manifesting behind him calmed Dio's mind. Even if Naegi had the potential for a Stand, despite his weak physical condition, it couldn't even match The World, let alone Holy Diver. Perhaps the vision was simply his doubt trying to weaken him.

After all, Makoto Naegi was the classmate who reminded him most of Jojo.
But he's not Jojo. I have already conquered this world. This is merely the coronation. Dio turned his head back to the wasteland, his friend already nothing more than a blur in the distance, and smiled at what he had done to this place. This was the power he wielded. With one last glimpse at the memorial stone, Dio briefly nodded his head. Goodbye, Jonathan.

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In a world of IFs, the tale of Jonathan Joestar and Dio Brando more often than not ends with tragedy.

Try as Jonathan might, it is a rare sight to see Jonathan out-live Dio in a victorious way. These IFs exist but are few in number. Dio Brando's willingness to do whatever it takes to live and triumph, no matter the cost to others, is what saves him many a time and Jonathan's willingness to fight for others at the cost of his own life is what dooms him.

But Dio does not win the war! There are IFs where he does so, but those are just as rare as the ones where Jonathan wins and lives a happy and long life with those he loves. Only someone like Dio could ever believe that Hope dies with a single person. That somehow he can conquer one man and think he can rule over the fate of a planet!

Jonathan Joestar was indeed erased from existence, but his deeds and legacy survived him! The fitting tribute to him was not an act of egotism mixed with twisted perceptions of kindness, but in the people who will pick up the torch that he left. Who will fight where he did for the future of humanity.

In this world, his legacy is survived by Makoto Naegi, Kyouko Kirigiri, and the rest of the Mutual Killing Game survivors refusing to kneel to Dio and defeating him in the battle he thought would signal his official reign. It is survived by Hajime Hinata and Class 77-B choosing to reclaim their futures from Dio's dark stranglehold!

It is Giorno Giovanna rejecting his father's way of life and fighting to become a Gang-Star like none other! It is Jorge 'Johnny' Joestar finding the courage to overcome his tragedies and be the man his brother knew he could be!

It is Erina Pendleton refusing to submit to despair and fighting to protect the memory and legacy that the man she loved like none other left behind!

Dio Brando killed Jonathan Joestar in this IF, as he did in so many others. But just like so many of these IFs, it is that legacy of hope, determination, and courage that out-lives Jonathan and is what truly dooms Dio to failure! Not an epitaph designed to appeal to a cruel king’s delusions of mercy; but the spirit of resistance against that very tyrant.

Jonathan Joestar may have died, but his spirit lived on in those who fight against the despair of Dio Brando.
Okay guys, next chapter should be up in a few days, but I think we've reached a point in the story where I can start putting in these little bits of info and fun facts that wouldn't make it into the story but I think you guys would enjoy seeing it.

**Bonus Features**

**JoJo Villain Talents**

Kars: Ultimate Biologist and Ultimate Inventor

Yoshikage Kira: Ultimate Lucky Student or Ultimate Salesman

Doppio/Diavolo: Ultimate Right-Hand Man/Ultimate Mystery Man

Enrico Pucci: Ultimate Priest

Funny Valentine: Ultimate President

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**Unused Stands**

**Rainbow In The Dark (Holy Diver Requiem)**

**Stand User: Dio Brando**

**Stats**

- Destructive Power: A
- Speed: A
- Range: C
- Durability: A
- Precision: B
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**

User can negate 'effect' on others, whether living or inanimate, if touched by either the hands of the user or Rainbow In The Dark. Requires time between immediate cause and effect to be less than five minutes.

User can resurrect the dead knowing only their appearance and will have loyalty and strength equivalent to those who user has full knowledge of with Holy Diver, regardless of knowledge held.
Can stop time for 5 seconds at a range of 10m. Anything entering this range other than the user freezes in time until duration ends. User cannot hear outside of this range and this ability requires a 're-charge' of ten seconds.

User can use Rainbow In The Dark and all abilities of Holy Diver.

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**Team-Up Dialogue**

Naegi/Kirigiri: "Kirigiri, I'll watch your back.", "Naegi, I really should be saying that to you. An open-book won't help in this fight."

Naegi/Togami: "Togami, be careful. We'll have to work together on this.", "Don't think I need your assistance, Naegi. Just keep them from doing anything suspicious and I'll keep the enemy from you."

Naegi/Asahina: "Don't worry, Naegi, I'll keep you safe from danger.", "Wow, Asahina. That kind of sounds like a line I should be saying to you."

Naegi/Fukawa: "I know I'm not Togami, Fukawa, but together we'll be more than enough for them.", "What are you suggesting?! I'd never cheat on Master for someone like you! Even if you are the Ultimate Hope!"

Makoto/Komaru: "Makoto, it's not safe, get behind me!", "No, Komaru, it's not safe, you need to get behind me!", "No, you!", "You!", etc.

Naegi/Hagakure: "Okay, Naegs, you take the front and I'll provide support.", "S-Sure, Hagakure."

Naegi/Dio: "It seems Fate has brought us together again, Naegi. Let's see whose Hope is stronger in this fight.", "Dio...you still don't get it."

Naegi/Jonathan: "Keep your spirits up, Naegi! I will keep you safe.", "Don't go too far. I'm not letting you get hurt for my sake!"

Naegi/Josuke: "Livin' On A Prayer's a pretty cool Stand, Naegi. Mind showing me how it works?", "It's nothing special. I'm actually jealous of your Stand, Josuke."

Naegi/Hinata: "Hinata, don't lose hope!", "You don't have to tell me, Naegi. I'm not who I was before. I'm never letting despair cloud my future again!"

Naegi/Komaeda: "To fight with the Ultimate Hope by my side. Ahh, it feels amazing.", "T-Thanks?"

Kirisu/Togami: "Togami, keep an eye on the enemy. We don't know enough about their Stands.", "I'm not who I was before, Kirigiri. If I'm to rebuild the Togami name, I won't just let my guard down."

Kirisu/Asahina: "Kirigiri, let's do this!", "Your drive's admirable. Just make sure you remember our surroundings."
Togami/Fukawa: "Fighting with Master...I'll keep you-", "Don't act as if you'll be taking the lead. Stay in the back and watch. You'll just get in the way."

Togami/Syo: "Control yourself, Syo. Remember what you and Fukawa promised me.", "Don't worry, my white knight, I won't hurt them too bad. Just don't get hurt yourself. You never know what Teenage Spirit can do when I get mad."

Togami/Asahina: "Gold and I can handle this ourselves. Just provide support.", "What? That ego of yours is going to get you killed. The Ocean is stronger anyway.", "What was that?", "You heard me."

Togami/Hagakure: "Togs, I got your back. With our Talents and Stands together, nothing's gonna stop a happy ending.", "Quiet. I don't need the power of your trash-Stand. Just stay back and watch me end this fight."

Hagakure/Asahina: "Asahina, I don't really have a cool line to say.", "That's okay, it'd probably be lame. Let's just help our friends and win this fight."

Dio/Kirigiri: "Kirigiri, disable their legs. Holy Diver will take care of the rest.", "We're not aiming to kill, Dio. Don't think of me as one of your slaves."

Dio/Izuru: "Izuru, keep them distracted whilst I prepare Holy Diver. That's possible even for a failure like you.", "Boring."

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**Dual Heart Attacks**

Naegi/Kirigiri: Opponent tries to attack Naegi when Kirigiri has Detective Man fire a Truth Bullet towards their spine. The enemy collapses to the ground, Kirigiri asks about an embarrassing secret, they lie and a Truth Bullet pierces through their left leg, disabling them. Livin' On A Prayer fires Hope Bullets at Kirigiri and Detective Man as she questions the opponent and reveals truths, gradually disabling and knocking them out.

Naegi/Asahina: Asahina throws Naegi behind her and fires a torrent of water at the opponent. Being pushed back, the opponent begins to advance slowly but surely. Asahina tries to increase the pressure but the opponent out-flanks her and charges. Shocked, she regains the initiative after Livin' On A Prayer uses Hope Bullets on her. The Ocean alters the surrounding's properties, throwing the opponent off, as Asahina uses her Swimmer Talent to deliver numerous blows before kicking them back. Asahina, empowered by Naegi firing Hope Bullets into her, uses the water on the floor to keep the opponent in place before firing a Hope-powered torrent of water directly at them.

Naegi/Togami: Opponent tries to hit Naegi but Togami intercepts, using Gold as armour, and fires golden bullets from his left hand. The opponent manages to start avoiding the bullets and Togami is running out when Naegi has Livin' On A Prayer fire a Hope Bullet. Inspired, Togami stops firing, drawing the opponent out and towards the two, when their foot is caught on the gold that gathered behind them and became viscous enough to hold them in place. Togami fires what remains of Gold as spears in non-fatal areas.

Naegi/Hinata: Opponent breaks through and strikes at Naegi, certain to kill. Hinata activates Don't
Stop Me Now and Naegi's will and hope allow for the opponent to miss. Don't Stop Me Now then attacks the opponent as Naegi fuels it with Hope Bullets.

Naegi/Jonathan: Jonathan strikes at the opponent but they get a lucky hit at his throat. He still strikes with Ripple Overdrive at the opponent but has trouble breathing. Naegi has Livin' On A Prayer fire Hope Bullets at Jonathan, letting him regain his breathing and increase the power of his blows into a Hope-Filled Ripple Overdrive.

Naegi/Josuke: Opponent attacks Naegi, Josuke intercepts and is injured. Livin' On A Prayer fires bullets even as Naegi is attacked. Opponent is tapped on the shoulder when Crazy Diamond begins punching them to unconsciousness. Crazy Diamond heals Naegi and Josuke thanks him. Proceeds to heal opponent to hit them again, over Naegi's soft protests, with the promise that he'll heal and only just knock him out.

Togami/Hagakure: Hagakure holds out a crystal ball and activates In The Year 2525. The opponent looks worried as a misty cloud forms and dances, only for Hagakure to predict that there's a 30% chance he's certain to win and get richer. The opponent attacks Hagakure, causing the ball to fall against the ground and break, unleashing the cloud that wafts over to Hagakure. Distracted, the opponent is ambushed from behind as Gold fires bullets of itself against their knees and neck, as Gold then moves in close enough to upper-cut them. Opponent goes flying and lands on top of Hagakure, embedded with parts of Gold that fall onto Hagakure who becomes $1 richer.

Togami/Fukawa: Togami fakes being badly wounded from a hit, using Gold as armour to minimise damage, causing Fukawa to use her stun-gun and become Syo. Syo, seeing Togami's body, throws scissors at the opponent. They dodge enough that the scissors leave small scratches, but Smells Like Teenage Spirit activates and the scratches become deep cuts pouring blood. Togami gets up and has Gold release tendrils to cover the bleeding areas and pull the opponent towards him. Gold then punches the opponent flying towards them.

Kirigiri/Togami: Togami sends out a piece of Gold to cover part of the surroundings and become gold coins. Opponent sees the coins and bags them when Kirigiri asks about the colour of the object Gold is covering. Opponent says its gold and Kirigiri fires a Truth Bullet, disabling them, before noting the coins in their pocket. Unable to move, the opponent is exposed as Togami then calls Gold back to punch them away.

Togami/Asahina: Asahina kicks the opponent in the chest, sending them over to Togami who hits them with Gold, finishing with a kick sending them flying into the sky. As they are in mid-air, both The Ocean and Gold fire bullets at the body of the opponent, battering their body and keeping them up, before they come flying down to earth. Seeing that it's neck-first, Asahina runs and jumps to where they're landing, The Ocean breaking their fall by altering surroundings to have water's properties. Asahina corrects the opponent's position and kicks them down on their back.

Dio/Naegi: Naegi fires a Hope Bullet in the eyes of the opponent. Disoriented, they can do nothing as Dio and Holy Diver begin savagely beating them to death, while Naegi and Livin' On A Prayer try to stop him.

Dio/Izuru: Izuru copies the opponent's attack with Boulevard of Broken Dreams and the two enter stalemate before Izuru's Talent wins out. Izuru turns around as the opponent is sent flying towards Holy Diver's barrage of fists.
Masaru breathed when he was done. In and out slowly, just like Dio told him to.

*He did it. He conquered the Boss Demon. All this time he lived in fear of the stench of alcohol and cigarettes, of not knowing when a strike could come out of nowhere, or of being abandoned for being a shitty son. None of that scared him anymore. He was just shaking because of nerves.*

Everyone else stood back. Dio had told them that these battles had to be fought on their own. The masked-guy protested until Monaka and Nagisa. They weren't shitty adults but they weren't babies either. They had been given enough help to last a gajillion lifetimes.

The Boss Demon was breathing slowly as well, but he wasn't in control. He saw Masaru's friends, Dio, and Dio's friend and had demanded answers from him. Maybe it was because of the other bodies in the room, but he was even threatening to hit him in front of others. Nothing like how he was with the cops.

There might have been a time where Masaru was afraid, but it wasn't now. It couldn't be now. Not when Dio was expecting him to use his My Hero.

It was like watching those old movies when his Demon was asleep. The villain's blows that might have torn apart the innocent bystanders was easily contained by My Hero's own blows. The Hero moved too swiftly for most of the Demon's blows and now had the strength to not only take them, but throw it back ten times harder.

The Demon was now just a pummelled piece of meat lying on the ground. He was still alive, somehow, despite bleeding all over and crying like Masaru would.

Who was the brat now?!

A hand touched his shoulder and the anger stopped. It didn't go away-it must never go away, that was what Dio said-but it simply froze in place. Peace of mind, the real thing and not whatever Jataro thought it was, came to Masaru.

"Total and utter defeat. Just as I knew it would be." Dio said, towering over Masaru like a King even as he crouched down. He spat on the body and glared down at it. "A shitty drunk like this could never defeat My Hero. Masaru, you've made me proud."
"But he’s not dead." Masaru thought he was supposed to kill the Demon. "My Hero can kill him. Make it hurt. I can do it, Dio! Just like you said."

"No. Not yet." Dio stood and walked towards the couch of the living room, where an ashtray and half-empty bottle of alcohol sat. Taking both with each hand, Dio walked back and stood tall against the Demon that Masaru had just defeated.

"Dio," His friend's voice shook as he talked. "What are you-"

"Demons like these, who act so cruelly towards their children. Treating them like scum when it is their duty to protect them," Dio tilted his hand and the alcohol began to stream out of the bottle onto the Demon, moving it so that it soon covered his whole body. "They deserve to know what Hell feels like."

It took a few seconds of the Demon's panicked screams for Masaru to realise what Dio was doing. The Demon shook its body and began flailing its fists and legs, grunting in pain, as it tried to escape. My Hero was quicker. Sure, it wasn't nearly as strong as Holy Diver, but it still looked cool. It was a mix between a knight in shining armour, a big white cape flowing behind it with the red symbol of a sword breaking a planet, but it had big hands as if they were boxing gloves.

Perfect for keeping the Demon down on the ground.

"Have I ever told you about how I killed my father, Masaru?" Dio asked, the last few drops coming out of the bottle. Masaru knew the story of what Dio's dad was like. An old and dark demon who killed an angel and tortured Dio until he rose up and slew the Demon himself. "I made sure every bit of it hurt. That his last few moments were spent lying in pain and agony as his body was corrupted from the inside. We don't have time for that now, but I, Dio, intend for you all to know the same feeling of putting people like him where they belong." Dio passed the ashtray, with a still-lit cigarette inside, to Masaru's hands. "Powerless and uselessly clinging to life."

This was the test. Masaru had to prove that he was willing to put it all on the line for their cause. For Hope, for the others, and for Dio. The Demons before had been killed quickly and randomly, the Warriors forced to act before they could scream for help, but now this had to be slow. This had to be painful.

It had to be ten years of hurt and torment in a matter of moments.

Masaru looked at My Hero. It was all covered in scars and bandages inside that armour. Masaru looked at the Warriors of Hope. All of them the victims of Demons. Masaru looked at Dio. The man who saved them and transcended the path to adulthood; to becoming a Demon.

The man who would take them to Heaven if they'd only help him spread Hope.

Masaru finally looked down on the Boss Demon. It was whimpering apologies and begging for him to not do this, to remember that they were family. He had never seen his father like this and yet it felt so familiar. It was nearly enough to make him hesitate.

Then he remembered why it was familiar. It was the words he'd say in his mind as his father knocked out teeth and kicked his chest. The words that could never reach a Demon's heart.

The cigarette was thrown, the ashes met the alcohol, and the Boss Demon was swallowed entirely by fire.

A choked squeal came from the Boss Demon and the smell was like cooking really stinky meat, plus he could hear Dio’s friend vomiting against a wall, but Masaru didn't care. The Warriors of Hope
were jumping and cheering, celebrating his bravery, while Dio simply stood and gave a soft smile and nod of his head. Masaru had proven himself worthy of being the leader of the Warriors of Hope.

After all, if the Hero couldn't kill Demons, then how could he serve the King?

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"Who the hell thought this was a good idea for home defence and battlefield recovery?" Togami muttered to himself, as Gold crushed the skull of the last Muralsee under its foot. The heat of the burning building did nothing to weaken the Stand's stomp. "The Towa Group have explaining to do."

The Muralsee had become a niche product after the world had seen the Mutual Killing Game. Few wanted to be protected by a machine that looked just like the tormentor of Class 78, and those few mostly lived in Towa City itself, refusing to deny their beloved benefactors anything. They even bought into that stupid kid's show.

The only benefit to the riots outside would be the final end to having to see these damned machines. Togami couldn't even take joy in that when knowing that hundreds had to die for that. It was easier before he had met Class 78—that is, met them again—and found himself attached to others.

Enough of the past. I need to focus. Togami had five agents of the Neo-Togami Group with him when he came in to rescue Naegi's little sister, and now he was down to two. Reaching the evacuation point was going to be a fight and he doubted he'd avoid casualties, even with Gold, with all the Muralsee running about.

If it hadn't been for his Stand and Hacking Gun combined, they might have been overwhelmed already. It was obvious now that this had been a trap. Togami needed to get out and warn the Future Foundation.

"Have they finally made their move?" Togami asked himself. He had heard tales of the Remnants of Despair, the parts of Dio's army that survived the death of their master and now roamed aimlessly, causing violence and pain wherever they went.

There were some in the Future Foundation who blamed Naegi for all this. If he had somehow kept Dio from destroying the Stand Arrow, they might have created their own army to match the Remnants of Despair, as if he could have stopped him. Togami knew better. He had been in that final battle.

It didn't make it easier to accept that the Remnants were out there with Stands of their own.

I'll just have to trust in Gold to fight them off. Togami thought to himself as he turned back to his men. Technically, they were Kirigiri's men, but their loyalties were to Togami, not the Future Foundation. Just how he and Kirigiri wanted it. "Alright, everyone," He said, looking to the agents just ahead of him, as another part of the building collapsed from the flames. "We're taking the stairs down. Just grab the bodies and get moving."

It was then that the floor collapsed. Where there was once solid ground, now there was just open air as Togami felt himself plummet down, glasses flying off his face. The fire had been more destructive than he realised, just able to look down enough to see that at least seven floors below had either
collapsed or were likely to break under his weight. If he didn't break his fall, broken legs would be the best he could hope for.

Gold reacted quickly. The form, once an exact copy of Togami but as gold, turned to a semi-liquid state and wrapped itself around him. Normally, it would then take the shape of armour and serve as protection, but not now. If he hit the ground in solid armour, the inside of it-Togami himself-would still take too much damage. If he was wrapped in something that would absorb more of the impact, his injuries would be fewer.

There was nothing for the agents. Gold was only enough to save himself and they had all known the risks of this mission when they took it. It had only been because of luck that they had the hope of recovering the bodies of the fallen, now lost to the flames and wreckage.

Togami didn't know how many floors he fell, he felt himself crash through three but that was only out of what was still intact, but the final landing took the wind out from him. The cold liquid gold almost rushed down his throat when he opened it from shock, but he willed it back and had Gold return to its original state. The semi-liquid flowed away from his body and he tried his best to stand up again.

Thankfully, the worst damage seemed to be having the wind knocked out of him and a sprained left knee. Inconvenient, but nothing that would stop him from reaching the evacuation point. If it hadn't left already. The agents he sent should have been enough to rush Komaru Naegi onto the helicopter, but there was no accounting for outside factors.

That Hacking Gun he gave her should have been ample enough defence in the right hands. Only he doubted if those hands were hers. She seemed to be constantly at the point of tears and had no idea what was going on. Had she heard anything about the outside world during her capture? Would she have enough composure to get herself where she was needed?

He'd have to find out for himself. He was in a corridor similar to the one he had just been in before the fire sent him falling. The floor he landed on wasn't too badly damaged by the fire, mostly spread by falling wreckage in this area, and was likely either the second or first floor. The surviving two agents were lost, there was nothing he could do about that.

*The priority is getting myself out of here. If this was a trap, I can't afford to be captured here.*

Togami gritted his teeth at the thought of some Remnant of Despair out-smarting him. *Byakuya Togami is no one's pawn. They'll pay for-

The sound of clapping ended his train of thought. Togami turned his head to the right to find out the source of the noise and narrowed his eyes, recognising the figure from the file.

He did look a bit like Naegi, didn't he? If someone had stretched Naegi until he was long and thin as a reed, threw on dishevelled clothing on him, and dyed his eyes grey. Of course, they'd also have to expose him to such horrors that it turned his hair white and rid him of every last shred of what made him the Ultimate Hope. If someone turned him into a shell of his former self and sent him out as some sick parody.

No one knew if he was truly with the Remnants. Reports spoke of him as a madman who went around preaching hope as if he was Naegi. Only his version of Hope was crooked and distorted. That tragedy should be welcomed as a way of wiping out 'weak hope' and replacing it with 'strong hope'.

Whether he had simply been driven mad by what his classmates did, or was a Remnant of Despair, Togami was sure of one thing.
He was right where this freak wanted him to be.

"Nagito Komaeda." Togami said, as he readied Gold for anything. "I'm guessing you were the one who planned out this ambush?"

"For the Ultimate Progeny to think trash like me could plan something like this...I'm so honoured." Komaeda said, elated at being noticed. He giggled and scratched the back of his head. "Actually, you falling here was just my luck. Otherwise, I'd have had to climb up nine flights of stairs to meet you. I was just here to pick you and Komaru Naegi up. I got caught in some bad business here, thinking it'd be safe from all the despair until now, so I need the two of you to come with me. Orders from above."

"Orders? So the Remnants have a new leader." Togami kept himself from sounding like it was a question. Maybe he could bait information out from him.

"Nothing like that. They're the same fallen wretches they've been for a while now. Though it's not like I'm any better; daring to think trash is better than an Ultimate, even a fallen one. Especially when I'm no better." Komaeda said. His face then fell as he bit his lower lip. "It hurts, you know. Having to fight and defeat an Ultimate like you."

"Be glad then. Because you'll be lucky enough to experience defeat by one of the Ultimates that slew Dio." Togami smirked.

Not even a second passed before dozens golden bullets shot out from Gold's head and chest and aimed straight downwards towards Komaeda's chest. Togami would need Komaeda alive; whether as a hostage to escape this city or to bring back and gain information from, so he avoided the head. Not that it mattered. Komaeda was quick enough to leap back and avoid the barrage.

The shock of their impact caused the floor to shake as Komaeda slithered back into the hallways. It seemed like he was planning on something when the corridor ahead of Togami shook as well. One minute, Komaeda was there, and then the next there was a pile of burning rubble collapsing on top of where he stood and buried him whole. A burst of fire from the mound forced him to look away.

It seems his Luck doesn't work that differently from Naegi's. Whether he's buried under all that or not. Togami had to get out of the building fast, and forget Komaeda. At this rate, both of them were going to be buried under the rubble of this building. Yet, just as Togami turned to leave, he heard the debris behind him shake and groan, forcing him to turn back. Just my luck.

Gold threw its right hand to the edge of the tiny hill of burning wreckage and it burst from a solid hand into a pile of liquid gold, the bullets gathering towards it, as the top of the heated wreckage burst off. Togami knew it would be a Stand, the fact that Komaeda saw Gold's bullets was enough proof of that. What shocked him was what the Stand looked like.

For one, there were two of them. Both were just slightly taller than Komaeda was and looked completely identical apart from their heads. One head looked like a motorcycle helmet whose screen went up to the top of the skull and had the word 'Miracle' right where its face should be. The other had a more robotic face, with its screen only consisting of a rectangular line going from ear-to-ear, or rather where its ears would be, just where its eyes should be. The word 'Tragedy' was written along that line.

On the right was 'Miracle' and on the left was 'Tragedy'. The left one was divided between the top half which was nearly completely transparent barring lines showing where its skin should be, and the bottom half filled up with swirling reddish-black colour. The one on the right was the same only the colour was a whitish-gold and filled up three-quarters of its body instead.
"All that burning wreckage and the worst was a few cinders on my face." A voice rasped out, partially choked by ash, as Komaeda's head emerged from the wreckage. He was right. The worst Togami could say was that the right cheek was slightly burnt. Well, that would be lying. The worst he saw was that damn smile on Komaeda's face. "I really am lucky toda-"

Bullets shot out from the pile of liquid gold as if it was a machine-gun turret built into the ground itself. They tore through blackened wood and other building materials going straight for Komaeda's head. Even when he was restrained, he managed to shove his head back and only scratch the front of his chin.

Not to mention exposing his neck for Gold's attack.

Gold flung its left arm across and five golden discs fired from the limb, spinning straight towards the throat to slice it open. It wouldn't be enough to kill, but Komaeda would have to rely on Togami's use of Gold to prevent death from blood-loss, unless his Stand had a power for it. Either way, Togami could only benefit.

Both of Komaeda's Stands threw their arms to intercept the golden discs, which embedded themselves into the four arms that protected Komaeda. The back-half of the discs that were not stuck in flesh shattered and became thin blades to shoot straight ahead. At this distance, and from where Togami stood, it was harder to direct them but as they shot forward, the sight of blood and Komaeda's soft moan of pain was enough.

Togami felt safe enough to advance. Dashing forward, he had Gold slam its fists against both of Komaeda's Stands, sending the two of them flying back. Komaeda himself, the scratches on his cheeks like a cat's whiskers and in complete contrast to the dark red ooze on his sleeves, was blown back as well.

It was a funny thing about Gold. Togami could only ever really manipulate its shape from a distance of about ten metres. Any more than that and it was useless, the fragment either maintaining its shape or disappearing entirely. It was infuriating at first, especially when Asahina's Stand had a better range itself.

Like most challenges, however, this one only served to hone his skills and sharpen his mind. Yes, he had a range restriction of ten metres, but he had all the freedom in the world within those ten metres. Gold could change its shape into anything, so long as it didn't require more of itself than it could give.

For example, Gold could sacrifice its legs and body weight to stretch one of its arms long enough to catch Komaeda in mid-flight. The impact of the sudden stop hit Komaeda like a whip-crack, and the Remnant of Despair did nothing as he was dragged towards Gold's other arm to be caught in a firm grip.

It was lucky that he had caught Komaeda in time. Any further and Komaeda could have escaped Gold's grip entirely.

"You're coming with me." Togami's tone brooked no argument. The building above was crackling and falling apart above them, the fire finally spreading below from the debris. They were blessed to have avoided any fire here. "The Future Foundation has questions for you and you're going to answer them. Who's behind the riots in this city will be a good one to start with."

Every alarm in Togami's head blared when he heard Komaeda chuckle. It wasn't just because it was an ugly laugh, one that rasped and seemed to suck in breath rather than release it. It was a sign that something was wrong.
That this had all been a trap.

"How can this be called good luck?" Komaeda asked, smiling yet upset. Laughing while also crying. "I'm about to utterly and completely humiliate an Ultimate. I'm going to tear down a beacon of hope. One of the people who helped the Ultimate Hope slay Dio! This isn't a Miracle, this is a Tragedy."

Those words triggered Togami's instincts. He looked around Komaeda across the room even as it creaked and moaned from the pressure above. Where were his Stands? The two that were meant to be standing by his side. Did they disappear when Komaeda had been caught?

No. Togami didn't know how he could have missed them when the right one—with the word Miracle on its helmet burning bright—was bathed in pure white-gold light. Its whole form shook and stirred as it seemed ready to burst at the seams from having to contain such energy. The one on the left had increased the amount of black light within it, but that one had only been two-thirds full.

Turning his attention back to Komaeda, trying to see if there was any giveaway in his eyes, Togami saw that what tears there had been were gone.

"Oh well," Komaeda said to himself, shrugging his shoulders. The display of emotions had been overcome like a sandcastle against a tidal wave. "I guess that's just how my luck goes. After good comes bad, and after bad comes good. I guess it's only proper that it's the same with Get Lucky."

At the sound of those last two words, the Stand on the right exploded. It was a strange explosion. There was no impact nor was there sound. The white light within simply made the gold-tinged body-shaped container burst and then there was something. The one on the left, tinged with silver and nearly full with black light, remained impassive as ever.

That was when the corridor ceiling collapsed.

Gold's grip had to be released so that it could throw Togami back and away from the wreckage. Komaeda himself stumbled back enough that he seemed to avoid the burning debris as well, along with the cloud of ash and smoke that spewed from the collapse. Togami himself got a mouthful of the dust and fell to his knees coughing his lungs out to remove the foreign intrusion.

Togami's vision was blurry with tears from the smoke and his ears rang from the close contact with the building's collapse. He could barely hear and see the sound and sight of dozens of Murralsee breaking into the room he and Komaeda were in. Arms smashing through the windows and floor tore through glass and wood to bring about the draconic faces of his once-tormentor. Dio's avatar during the Mutual Killing Game.

*Where's the Hacking Gun?* He wondered. The useful weapon had been given by the Towa Group and had managed to wipe out dozens of Murralsee at full-power, only it had slipped his mind when the floor above had collapsed and his priority was to save himself. Not that it would have helped, upon seeing the few shards of the mega-phone on the floor to his left. *Did Komaeda's Stand have something to do with this? Or was it always broken?*

There was nothing else for it. Gold would just have to fend them off while Togami looked for escape. He could get about twenty metres if he used Gold's ability to act as a duplicate, but that'd rely on him navigating his way out of the city alone. If he was leaving, it'd have to be with Gold by his side.

That was when a rock struck the bridge of his nose. Bone didn't break, but it certainly cracked. Gold was already smashing its fists and legs through the Murralsee and could do nothing to protect its master from tiny projectiles being thrown over the mound of debris in the corridor. Komaeda's Stand
clearly had a spiteful side to it.

All the while Togami tried to navigate through the smoke rising into the room, the heat causing him to sweat into his suit, and the Murralsee slowly smashing their way through what the fire hadn't destroyed. Not to mention he didn't have his glasses, normally not necessary for good vision, but definitely for an excellent standard.

"Uh oh, looks like you've filled up too. I guess it's time for a Tragedy." Komaeda's voice sang into the air as Gold, despite its best efforts, couldn't stop one or two Murralsee approaching him.

In hindsight, he wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not that there was a final loud crack, causing the Murralsee to look up. The building was finally about to completely collapse. Gold rushed to cover Togami in its armour again, a final protection against the weight of an entire apartment complex, but he knew it wouldn't matter.

*Luck. What a dangerous Talent.* Togami grimaced as fire and darkness consumed both him and Gold entirely.

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It was only when they were just leaving the hospital that Komaru finally noticed that the green mist wasn't coming from the hospital.

"You can do magic too?" Komaru couldn't keep the awe out of her voice. No wonder Fukawa was able to cut through all those Murralsee, when she used her taser. "Did those kids stab you with an arrow as well, Fukawa?"

Komaru Naegi was just your normal girl until a few years ago. Then she became your normal girl who had been kidnapped and locked in an apartment for about two years now. Right now, she was your normal girl trying to survive in a crazy apocalyptic hell-scape filled with giant androids killing everyone.

The only weapon she had was the Hacking Gun that Togami had given her and that had been changed for 'game balance' by Servant. All she could do was aim and hope that the bullet would somehow hit the thin eyes of the Murralsee. It often took a lot more shots than it should and Fukawa had to save her sometimes.

Touko Fukawa. Komaru didn't know how long she could have lasted on that rooftop without Fukawa being there to save her. Or should she say Genocider Syo saved her? Either way, she had gone from being slaughtered in that weird 'Demon-Hunting Game' to being saved from danger. All Fukawa needed was a pair of scissors and she was cutting through the Murralsee like a hot knife to butter.

Did the Future Foundation have one of those strange arrows? But then why did the kids call Monaca magic? Was she somehow related to their creation? She certainly knew enough to have Servant stab Komaru straight in the spine with that golden arrow. For a brief moment, Komaru had thought she died right there.

Only the wound soon healed and, before she knew it, she was told that she'd have to use her power if she wanted to survive. But what power? What had they meant? All questions she might have
asked were forgotten after she got dropped from the airship and sent plummeting down on a parachute. She barely had time to cover her skirt. 

So here she was now. Being hunted down by a group of children who all had spooky ghosts behind them, and now able to use magic itself. Komaru knew she wasn't alone in this; there were others being hunted down as well, but she had to escape first. There was no way that she could survive in Towa City. 

Komaru was normal. She didn't have a Talent, wasn't all that smart, and wasn't that strong either. There was no way that she could be like Fukawa and just cut through all this. All she could do was rely on Fukawa to protect her and lead the way to safety, after she agreed to help. 

_Even if she can be grumpy and mean, she's still helping me. Maybe I'm being ungrateful._ Komaru told herself. After all, Fukawa's magic seemed a lot better than hers. 

"It's not magic, Omaru. It's science." Fukawa said, jolting Komaru out of her thoughts. Her protector glared. "You've been infected by an unknown virus and your body's ability to fight infection manifests as what we call a Stand. Though how someone like you is somehow able to have one is amazing in itself. You were probably the sibling who got days off school because of a constant fever."

"Not really. That was always my big brother." Komaru said, deciding to go with Fukawa's explanation. It wasn't the strangest thing to happen today, and she was happy to talk about her past. "He'd get sick from anything."

"Yeah, and you probably had fun playing nurse." Fukawa's face changed from a glare to something else. Her index fingers touched and her face was blushing while muttering just loud enough for Komaru to hear. It was like when Fukawa was having her dream earlier. "'Time for your sponge-bath!' All to see him naked."

"It wasn't anything like that!" Komaru and Makoto were just siblings. Not even the modern mushy type either, but they'd argue over a lot of stuff. She never tried to play nurse! Well, maybe not never. "I may have put a flannel on his face to help wipe the sweat off. But that was because our parents were out at the time!"

"Sure." Fukawa said, although she didn't seem to believe a word. Komaru let out a whine and shuffled in place, wondering if Fukawa really thought she was like that. "What's it called?" The question came out of nowhere. Komaru's mind went blank and she tried to figure out what Fukawa meant before she got mad- "Your Stand, Omaru! What's your Stand called?" Fukawa snapped, jolting Komaru into action. 

"It's name? Ummmm..." Komaru had a name for it, but she didn't know what it meant. What if Fukawa heard it and thought it was dumb. Better to play it safe. "What do you think it should be called?"

Fukawa definitely didn't like that answer. "Don't just lump responsibility onto me. Stands have names that you know instinctively! Why would I call my Stand Smells Like Teenage Spirit otherwise? You think I like advertising how long it's been since I had a bath?"

"Alright. Alright." Komaru said, surrendering to Fukawa's iron-will. She had tried to not say anything about the other smell as well. "We Built This City." She confessed. 

As she said the name, _We Built This City_ emerged from her and moved to her side. If there was only one good thing to say about what Servant did to her, it was that she now had a cute friend to spend
time with. The 'Stand' looked just like Komaru, but with a silvery chrome skin that made it look like a UFO from those old movies, and its ahoge twitched from left to right as if it was removable.

*There's no way it is though.* Komaru said to herself. That'd be way too cool for someone normal like her.

No. The power of *We Built This City* came in the form of its shield. Komaru closed her eyes and thought hard, what she thought was the needed activation, and she could feel *We Built This City* twist and expand around her. Now she was in complete darkness but also total security.

It had first emerged when she was on the roof and dozens of Murralsee were coming towards her. Komaru had crawled into the ball and begged for someone to save her when the shield emerged. Confused, but grateful, she had thought she was safe from the assault until she realised how little air there was. The constant clanging of metal against metal didn't help her thoughts.

If Fukawa hadn't been there to save her, she didn't know what she'd do.

Now in a happier place, even if it was a wrecked city under a blood-red sky, Komaru decided to play around with the power. She wondered how the shield even worked when the top retracted in a circular motion, causing the rest of the shield to move down until it was a ring in the ground, the material moving to reform *We Built This City*.

Komaru concentrated and it went back to forming a shield again, only now she could tell that the shape was like an egg shape if it was stretched out. Moving a foot up, the shield even moved in on the floor, making her realise that *We Built This City* protect her from below as well. This was amazing!

*This is the perfect Stand for me.* Komaru beamed as she played with making the walls of the shield go up and down, up and down, for fun. For someone like her, who couldn't do anything to save herself, *We Built This City* was great for her. She turned to Fukawa.

"What do you think?" She asked. Fukawa's *Smells Like Teenage Spirit* was great for attack, and Komaru's *We Built This City* was great for defence, so the two made a perfect team, right?

"I think it's a coward's Stand. So it fits perfectly for you." Fukawa replied.

Komaru's bottom lip wobbled and *We Built This City* reforming itself again, drooped after hearing that cutting remark. A coward's Stand? Komaru might be a coward, but there were nicer ways to say it. Not to mention she hurt *We Built This City*'s feelings as well!

Maybe she was just being grumpy because helping Komaru escape was distracting from her rescue-mission. Though Fukawa had such awful names for her friends that maybe she was always like this, apart from with Togami. Maybe she just didn't understand what it meant for Komaru.

She wasn't amazing or cool like Fukawa. Komaru was just a normal girl in an abnormal situation who needed to get out of it as fast as possible. Once she was somewhere safe, she could start trying to find help finding her family. It wasn't like she could do anything here.

*We Built This City* disappeared as Komaru readied her Hacking Gun, which was more of a megaphone but its name was cooler to say, for the move ahead. She and Fukawa were wasting time just talking when they could be spending it helping her escape this place and from those kids.

*As long as I have Fukawa to protect me, we'll get out of this city in no time.* Komaru told herself. She and Fukawa had Stands, she had the Hacking Gun, and Fukawa definitely knew what she was doing.
What was the worst that could happen?

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"You still feel like crying, Omaru?" Fukawa asked, hearing Komaru sniffle again. They had just entered the lobby of the hotel and Komaru still hadn't entirely gotten herself together. "If we're going to enter the subways, you might as well get it out of your system."

"No. I can't cry right now." Komaru said. Fukawa had to hide her shock at the strength behind that voice. "We need to see if this person needs our help."

Maybe Fukawa was wrong about her. The idiot's little sister may have been a useless cry-baby, but there were moments where she seemed to show promise. Where she showed that she could actually grow up and face the dangers ahead.

It was just a shame that they were rare. Komaru was one of those girls who spent most of their life telling themselves that they couldn't do anything and took an perverse pride in that. Fukawa didn't think it'd be this difficult to guide a Naegi towards those kids. Where was the fire to spout some positive drivel?

_I didn't expect her to be a total flake and coward._ Fukawa was constantly being made to take the lead. Every time Komaru expressed an opinion, she just backed down the second Fukawa offered criticism, gave up hope whenever she felt doubt. Most of the time, she was just crying about her situation to the point where Fukawa could do a perfect impersonation. 'Waa, I'm normal. Waa, I can't do anything. Waa, protect me, Big Bro, with your strong arms.'

Fukawa didn't shut down when the Swimming Idiot's brother...exploded. Fine. Just say what it was. He was moving across the water one moment and then he was dust in the wind the next. Fukawa could face it. She didn't collapse into a pile, having to be picked up and told to move forward. Not that it didn't shock her either.

It happened so fast.

But what did Komaru expect? This game—the word sending a familiar chill down her spine—was designed by those kids to kill every last one of their loved ones. They clearly had counter-measures to take out Stand users. We Built This City couldn't protect Komaru from an explosion inside her stupid shield, and Yuta's Run For Home couldn't even summon a shield. All it did was let him run on water.

_Couldn't do anything about exploding bracelets, could it?_ Fukawa cynically thought to herself. What did Komaru and Yuta think would happen? That'd it be that easy? Fukawa could tell she was going to have to drag Komaru towards this fight, at this rate.

A part of her hissed about this betrayal. This girl, Naegi's little sister, was going on about how special Fukawa was and how smart she was and her thanks was being sent into battle. But so what? Komaru was probably just saying that to make Fukawa do everything for her. The second she was free, she'd ditch Fukawa for her big brother.

She didn't want to think about Komaru in the Killing Game. She'd have probably bowed to Dio the
second he showed off Holy Diver.

Maybe there was hope for her though. Komaru had been the one to spot the children standing outside the hotel door, almost as if they were guarding it, and were acting differently. The others were playfully pointing the Murralee towards the adults they saw, or were acting like kids, but these ones didn’t dare leave the hotel lest an approaching Murralee wasn’t ordered away.

The shadow by the window on the twelfth floor had something to do with it.

Komaru had insisted they investigate to see if it was another person being Hunted, until Fukawa pointed out that it could be a trap, which made Komaru immediately give up, forcing Fukawa to insist they go out of disgust. Was she going to have to do everything for this potty-head?

So here they were. Of course the hotel elevator wouldn’t be working. That’d make it easy for them. Instead, they had to move up by the staircases in constant fear of ambush. At least the lights were still on and both girls were free of the thick and ever-consuming dark. Not to mention that they managed to make it up without meeting any Murralee.

Now if only they didn’t have to climb up ten flights of stairs.

"We-we need to catch our breath." Komaru wheezed the words out as she fell against the wall to the right of the stairs. She still had enough breath to whine. "These staircases are too big."

"What? Is your head too big and it's weighing you down? Or just your thighs?" Fukawa replied. She had never been athletic, what was Komaru’s excuse.

"You're tired too, Fukawa. And my head and thighs are a normal size and weight for a girl my age." Komaru mewled.

Another two flights of stairs and absolutely no Murralee encounters later, which Fukawa was glad about as it meant less reminders of Holy Diver, they had arrived on the floor where the shadow waited. There were kids wearing those damn helmets just by the corridor, but these were different as well. They just played quietly and kept their space from a certain door to the right of the corridor left of the stairs.

Who was this person? A Stand user, most likely, but whether they would be an ally or enemy depended on what they did. Fukawa motioned for Komaru to flank one side of the door as she would another. They had to be careful to not make them panic, but also get the drop on them if this was a tra-

Komaru knocked on the door. "Hello?" She asked, with that dumb loud voice of hers. Fukawa was frozen in shock. "Whoever's in there, it's okay to come out. We're not enemies like these kids or the Murralee."

*What the hell are you doing?* Fukawa screamed without making a noise. She heard the sounds of someone stepping towards the door and readied her taser and scissors. What if the Stand user was going to try and escape or-

"No autographs. Can't you read the sign? Or is reading too difficult for people nowadays?" A curt voice replied from inside the room. He didn't sound the least bit afraid. If anything, he sounded dismissive.

"What sign? There is no sign." Fukawa snapped, awed by the man's ingratitude. Did he mean the piece of paper lying a few doors along? "Why the hell would there still be a sign? Signs don't matter right now, if you bothered to look out the window."
A loud scoff came from the other side of the door. "So the staff still aren't doing anything about these thieves. Acting like they have better things to do than-forget it. Hang on, I'll show you a new one."

The voice said, the sound of something being written on paper filling the dead air.

Underneath the door, paper slid out and Komaru turned her big head down so fast that Fukawa thought it'd break something. A gasp came out and Fukawa readied herself for anything. A few steps could be heard and then she felt a firm grip on her arm before being spun around. What was Komaru doing? Was this the work of a Stand?

Gah! That expression was too sunny. "Fukawa, look! It's Pink Dark B-"

The door slammed open and Fukawa could only watch in horror as Komaru's face literally peeled off to reveal paper with writing on it. Fukawa had only moments to see the kind of information written on it, like Chest Size: 81cm (she knew it!), when a hand extended and began to write in the margins of the paper. Just as the ink on the pen dried, and the papers closed up again, Fukawa just managed to read the writing.

'I will ensure that Rohan Kishibe is not disturbed in his work. I will protect his manga'

She threw the taser against her forehead and kept a tight grip on the scissor blade as she turned to look at this Stand user in the eye. Whatever his Stand did, it required seeing whatever was on that sign first.

"Try it and I'll show you what a real Stand can do." Fukawa warned.

That got the creep's attention. He had black hair slicked to the side, a light-blue shirt that didn't even cover his midriff covered by a silver jacket that was as small as the shirt, and a red hairband that was jagged on the bottom. It was his teal eyes that caught her attention. Where they once held contempt, now they were wide with shock.

Or it might have been the sight of her with a taser against her head, and a scissor-blade to his throat.

"Stands?" He asked, his voice shaking somewhat. Whatever composure he lost was regained and his eyes narrowed again. "How the hell do you know about Stands? Do you have a Stand?"

"We are sorry for intruding, Rohan-sensei." Komaru's grip tightened as she gave a slight bow in apology. She began to walk back towards the stairs, dragging Fukawa with her. "We will ensure your work is not disturbed."

"Omaru? Let go of me." Fukawa tried to struggle against Komaru's grip but it was useless. Her man-hands were just too strong. We Built This City even grabbed her taser so she couldn't become Syo. Her only rescue came when the weirdo rushed towards Komaru and opened her face again, removing the writing he had put in her. Fukawa snapped the second she was free. "What the hell even is that?"

"Shut up. Explain." The creep replied. Fukawa was stunned silent, which the man before her took as a sign of stupidity. "Where did you get those Stands from?"

"Where did-do you not know who I am?" She knew that Naegi got all the fame for killing Dio, but Fukawa contributed. A cruel smile came to her head as she realised what this was. "I see. Are you one of those hikikomori who just hide in their rooms all day to jack off? That's some dedication, to ignore everything that's happen, all to focus on your big-boobed waifus. Maybe drawn a porno or two while your parents pay for this? That Stand must be helpful in making people support that lifestyle."
The creep scoffed again and looked at Fukawa as if she was poop on his shoe. "This coming from someone like you? Let me guess, you spend most of your days indoors in the dark and have no friends because you don't trust others? You barely take care of your own body and are rejected by others? Please. One look at you and I can see that you're the cliche aggressive shut-in character. Not even a good one that turns the genre around its head.

"As for myself, I don't deal in those shitty characters drawn by hacks to satisfy their sexual urges and win over editors who put merchandising cash over artistic merit. The characters I draw have body proportions relative to the average human's to ensure realism." He said, his voice growing bitter as he rambled on. "When I draw art, it's done to portray a real world to the reader. Not some masturbatory fantasy."

"So you're a manga-artist with pride? Like being king of the trash." Fukawa supposed people felt pride about a lot of things. It didn't mean it was worth that pride. Just because this guy could make his fan-service a bit more subtle than the 'average' mangaka

"Fukawa, don't be rude! Do you know who this is?" Komaru's voice cut through. She sounded appalled that it was Fukawa who didn't know who this guy was. "He's Rohan Kishibe, the famous manga artist. Excellent art, realistic characters, he's only ever broken schedule three times in his entire career. One of those was because he was busy moving from the Shonen Jump offices to his room here! I forgot he lived in Towa City!"

"I got tired of dealing with hacks." Rohan said, turning away from Fukawa to face Komaru. "So you're a fan?"

"Well, I'm more into Shoujo manga myself, but sometimes I like to read other stuff." Komaru said, shuffling in place with a blush. She was acting as if she was meeting a celebrity instead of the next evolution for people like Yamada.

"Wow, you two can bond over being into shitty manga." Fukawa said, refusing to hide her mockery. Komaru gasped in horror, while Rohan barely gave her a side-glimpse.

"My manga is not shitty." He was in clear denial of his own lack of artistic merit.

"All manga is shitty." Fukawa replied. Komaru made a soft growl of indignation.

"No. Most of it is." Rohan jabbed the air ahead of Fukawa's collarbone at that. If that was how he wanted to play it with a real writer then-

"Fukawa! I won't let even you disrespect shoujo manga like that." Komaru caught her attention, and Rohan's, with that. Fukawa was shocked. Something so stupid ignited a fire within her? "I may only read a book once a week but those stories of love and a girl's entrance into adulthood help guide generations. And Rohan-sensei is a great artist. Sure, his works are a bit niche, and they can be really dark, and they were shonen so I didn't read it that much, and especially less now that it's in Seinen Jump." Komaru mumbled those last few words out. Maybe it was realising what she was saying, or Rohan's less than impressed look. "But still! Pink Dark Boy is great. It's like To-Love Ru or Sword Art Online or Fairy Tail, even if it's way sadder. So maybe it's more like Bleach and-

"You think Pink Dark Boy is like Bleach? Fairy Tail? Sword Art Online?" Rohan asked. Fukawa didn't recognise any of the names, she assumed it was manga, but she could tell Komaru was on dangerous ground.

"Sorry, I forgot that last one isn't manga." Komaru said to herself. She then nodded to affirm her words, not knowing that she signed her own funeral.
"Heaven's Door." Rohan opened Komaru's face up again and wrote a command. Fukawa had to compliment him on his writing speed; it matched hers when she hit inspiration. "Go read some other person's manga. I have no need for readers who just take what they're given regardless of quality." He said.

With the command 'I will not try to communicate with Rohan Kishibe' inscribed, and the paper closing over her face again, there was nothing she could do. Komaru struggled to try and say something to Rohan, and failed, so she instead turned to Fukawa to probably relay a message. Only that seemed to fail too.

Just how powerful was Heaven's Door?

Rohan ignored Komaru's struggles and turned his full attention towards Fukawa. The children standing by the corridor and other hallways didn't even react, probably having the same kind of commands written into their very skin and flesh.

"I noticed that there were people knocking at the door, but I thought those were just fans who tracked me down and editors demanding shitty changes. I have a drawing of Pink Dark Boy on the door and normally just use Heaven's Door while they're distracted by the artwork." He explained, as a tiny silver humanoid wearing a stupid hat emerged behind him. "Who gave you the Stand? I thought the other Arrows were locked away somewhere. How did some homeless girl like you get a Stand without one?"

"H-Homeless? It's not my fault the Future Foundation were cheap on clothes! You try finding clean water in this city." Fukawa snapped, before seeing the look in his eyes. The look of confusion when she said 'Future Foundation'. Did he really not know what was going on outside? "You really don't know anything about what happened on the outside, do you?"

"Why would I?" He asked, as if doing otherwise would be strange. "The Towa Group lets me explore their nature projects for research, after I used Heaven's Door on their President, and the world outside Towa City is unnecessary until my next research trip. Editors just come in for food and drink and I have e-mail correspondence with people who interest me. It's mostly for research. All this time, I've been working on my manga and finishing it up. After Dark Pink Boy: Morioh Town suffered from poor taste by readers, I went to Seinen Jump and have tried to move on." Rohan was acting like his personal life was what mattered here. "Did something happen?"

"..." Fukawa decided to delay explaining the The Tragedy in favour of finding out about this 'Heaven's Door'. That name itself gave her the creeps. It reminded her of Dio talking about 'Heaven'. "When did a Stand Arrow hit you? Who was holding it? Was there someone there? Tall, blonde, well-defined figure, go by the name 'Dio'?"

That got Rohan's attention. His Stand even locked up in place as there was something strange behind his eyes. Vulnerability. "I thought there'd be no one else. No one who remembered-" Rohan regained his senses and sighed, walking towards his room again. "I'll show you where I got my Arrow and you tell me everything that's happened in the last year and a half. Especially the part about Dio Brando."

"Fine." Fukawa looked at Komaru, who was starting to snuffle at her inability to express herself. "Also take out that command from Omaru. It's not her fault that you two have different styles of lacking in taste or artistic appreciation." She demanded, which made Komaru stop sniffling and become annoyingly happy again.

"Only after you explain everything," Rohan replied. He didn't seem happy about the thought, or maybe Fukawa's words. Walking through his door, he jabbed a thumb forward and to the right. "I..."
also have a shower in my room. Use it."

Fukawa ignored that insult and both she and Komaru entered the mangaka's room. It was close to what she expected in that stacks of papers were lying next to the desk where drawing supplies were arranged to ensure the easier access to drawing their porn or whatever. Another desk next to it held a computer for communication and research, at least if the internet was still up. Beyond that was a bed and doors that led to other rooms.

The hotel itself looked swanky and the state of the door itself, nice and well-kept, was enough to tell Fukawa that this was less a room and more a suite. A suite with a living room, used for drawing lame manga, and access to a bathroom and bedroom. The walls were filled with pictures of a person who looked just like Heaven's Door only different in many ways, making Komaru gasp in awe, where there weren't shelves filled with books.

It was disturbingly similar to Fukawa's own room.

Except mine is a temple to good literature. This is an Otaku's Paradise. Urgh, just the thought of having to rely on some otaku who thought he was an artist was enough to make Fukawa retch. But if he knew about the Arrow, and had a Stand of his own, then she had no choice.

Rohan pulled out a picture from the top drawer of his desk. It was a picture of him holding a Stand Arrow. "Alright, I guess I should start with the beginning. This Arrow is one of six that were being sold in an auction in Egypt. I only stumbled onto it by chance. I was visiting Egypt for manga research and...other things. When I saw the auction, for my own reasons, I bid high. Probably my entire life savings. It didn't matter. I needed to get one of these at any cost. Hope's Peak out-bid me though, so I had to use Heaven's Door to make them forget about the sixth and I stole the last one. If you want to know the location of it now, you'll have to tell me what I want to know."

"Wait, you had that Stand before the Arrow?" That couldn't be. All the papers the Future Foundation had said the same thing. You needed direct contact with the virus to get a Stand. She pointed a shaking finger at him. "How's that even possible? How do I know you're not some Remnant of Despair? Or a member of another one of Dio's little cults like those kids?"

"First, you need to take a shower." Rohan's sharp words took Fukawa aback. What did he just say? "Your stench is atrocious. It's like you decided to just throw on whatever you felt like wearing today and thought it'd be fine if you added some deodorant."

That was it. Fukawa had no choice but to lay down the law and pull rank. So long as she didn't see any copy of Rohan's own drawing of 'Pink Dark Boy'-a stupid name for a stupid character-she'd be fine. Komaru could back her up as well. You didn't need to communicate with an enemy.

Fukawa jabbed her finger at Rohan's chest and stepped forward.

"Listen you piss-poor excuse of a writer, I write real books that have real impact unlike your doujinshi and I won't-" Rohan raised his hand and moved it in the air as if he was drawing something. It was too late before Fukawa realised what he was drawing, his Heaven's Door manifesting itself and forcing her face to open into pages. When it was done writing, the pages closed and her face was normal again. Well, as normal as a sweating fit and howl of panic could look. "W-What did you do to m-?"

She stopped talking, not by her own will, and walked towards a door knowing where it led to despite having never been in there before. Her status as the Ultimate Writer gave her some unique skills. The ability to churn out a best-seller in one week, able to devour tomes in a day, and one other skill. A skill that made her stomach sink in horror.
'I will wash myself until I no longer stink.'

*Please let the shower have some hot water left.* Fukawa inwardly begged, as Komaru leaped onto her body to try and weigh it down. It was no use, no matter how chubby Komaru was. All she could do was pray that the hotel still had water running in that shower. Or that it’d be enough. If there was no more water, then she’d have to have to use the– *Need to become Syo. Can’t let self wash in toilet water. Don’t act like an idiot like Omaru.*

Touko Fukawa never knew she could hate anyone as much as she hated Rohan Kishibe.

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*They weren’t kidding.* Rohan thought to himself. The scent of rotting flesh slithered into his nose and wouldn’t leave, nor did the sight of dozens—if not over a hundred—corpses lying there with faces etched in horror. *These children are Dio's minions.*

When he heard the story from Komaru and Fukawa, he had thought they were exaggerating. Rohan may have isolated himself from the world in this city for a few years, too frustrated to keep on pretending that this was real, but the world couldn’t have ended the way they said it. Even when he used Heaven’s Door to see if they were lying, they were telling the truth.

But that didn’t mean anything! Not with those two pathetic characters barely worthy of even an effortless manga made to made a few Yen. You had Komaru Naegi who just accepted whatever trash or opinion she was given, as if she had stopped mentally ageing after five, and just followed Fukawa’s lead. Fukawa—the so-called Ultimate Writer—who wallowed in her own hypocritical filth.

They could have been fascinating. Komaru as the girl locked away in an apartment complex to control her brother then released into the world, Fukawa as a girl struggling to hold back her dark side when constantly poured with society's hate. As with a lot of things in this world, however, expectation became disappointment fast.

*Almost regret not letting her wash with the toilet water.* He only stopped her when he decided that he’d need their cooperation. *Smells Like Teenage Spirit* had a lot of potential, and he didn’t feel like testing if Genocider Syo—even if she turned out to be interesting—would be affected by a command on Fukawa. The three of them agreed to travel together to find a way out of this damn city, on the condition that they would return to collect his manga.

But all thoughts of escape fell when they were caught in this trap. The kid was too far away for Heaven’s Door and was content to talk about how he was going to kill them. His Stand growled behind him, a child’s version of a knight that had bandages seeping out from the gaps in its armour.

Rohan had only ever heard of Dio Brando and the stories of his evil, before...everything, but this was proof that his legacy could even last into the end of the world. That a child could kill so many and stack their bodies as if they were trash. Fukawa had closed her eyes to it, but Komaru and Rohan couldn’t do it in time.

*There's still time to change the second act. We got the bodies all wrong. Look at how the outstretched limbs aren't going limp.* Rohan silenced the voice in his mind. He needed to focus on the battle ahead, rather than readying for edits to the manga chapters he hadn’t given to his editor yet.
"Tch, so you're the typical psychotic-child killer type." Rohan said, stepping forward and glaring at Daimon. The kid himself didn't seem to appreciate the show of defiance. "I've seen your kind plenty of times. I'll give points for being original in that you're not just all sweet and innocent before revealing the insanity, but this is the kind of stuff you'd get from an everyday anime. I wouldn't even put you in as a side-villain in my manga."

"Shut up! I don't need that kind of crap from some Demon who thinks he's so smart." Daimon snapped, putting his hands to his side like he was a DC hero before raising his right fist in triumph. "When I'm done with you, I'll stick your head up your ass! Then I'll make my own manga and it'll be all about me and the Warriors of Hope killing demons!"

The crowd of children screamed their approval. If Rohan had to guess from what he heard, the stories of children ordering those machines to kill adults, they were nothing but brainwashed goons. The helmets not only protected from and allowed them to control the machines, but also made them slaves to Daimon's will.

Komaru and Fukawa probably weren't thinking that. They were too busy watching in horror at a ten year-old talking about how he was going to kill them all. How he was going to keep killing adults.

"B-But you'll become an adult too." Komaru said, barely able to keep the tears away. "You can't stop ageing! You're just killing innocent people for no reason."

"I'll never become a Demon! I'll die before that happens. I'll be like Dio, the strength of Demons with the purity and hope of a child!" Daimon howled. He was speaking through his teeth now, Rohan thought his rage might have made him do something stupid. "My Hero will rip your chests open and use your guts like lassos to catch the remaining Demons in this city. They'll be stacked so high that all the children can use it as a ladder to Heaven."

The audience roared their approval for Daimon's pledge. It looked like the fight was about to start.

"We can't hesitate, Omaru. At any cost, we have to stop these kids." Fukawa said. "Their Stands alone probably added to the pile."

Her words were firm but the way she tried to avoid looking at the pile of corpses undermined her. The fact that someone like Komaru was still standing despite that sight said something about her. Something that made her worth something to Rohan. If only she wasn't such a coward most of the time.

Daimon was shaking in place now. Rohan had thought he was feeding off the energy of the crowd, until he saw My Hero. The Stand that was gripping the sides of Daimon's arms tightly enough that it had to be leaving marks.

"That's right, I'll protect everyone. The King can be there so the Hero will take his place in the charge. No matter the wounds, no matter how much it hurts, My Hero will heal them all. If I need to be quick, it'll make me lightning. If I need to be strong, it'll make me an inferno. If I need to be tough, it'll make me a boulder. All I have to do is believe in myself!" Daimon screamed those words at the top of his lungs.

**He's afraid. It's forcing him to not look afraid.**

"Why wouldn't he? He was having to rival the cries of his adoring people. The leader-but not the real one, Rohan could smell the cliche of a fake leader a mile away-looked like he was fuelled by the crowd itself. As if their bloodlust and thirst to see a fight was making him stronger. Rohan, Fukawa, and Komaru readied themselves for the fight.
But for all of Daimon's bluster, he couldn't keep the fear out of his voice. Out of his own body.

"I can be a hero for children everywhere. That's what he said. Just so long as I believe in myself. So long I don't get scared of the pain. Of the hurt. Of the senseless violence of Demons." Daimon's voice was quieter now, still fighting the general hum of his child army. His right arm was even shaking. That itself seemed to stoke his anger. "I'm not scared! I'm not scared of the Demons anymore!"

The stench of death remained, Rohan even eyed a few maggots falling from their banquet to the earth below, but all of that was ignored. The tears on the edges of Daimon's eyes, the way his whole body shook with fear and rage, and the hatred he was directing towards his own arm. Jotaro hadn't been lying when he told them about the loyalty Dio inspired in his followers.

The kind of people who fell for his charms.

Masaru Daimon could deny it all he liked but his body knew the odds. The adults he killed had been fearful and unable to see where his Stand could tear them to shreds, or could do nothing against the machines he commanded. Rohan doubted he ever faced other Stand users before. The demons he thought he overcame had the same powers as him.

Not to mention Komaru's mega-phone. Now not even his Murralsee could defend him.

Daimon reacted as all children did when encountering a situation that they couldn't control. They screamed, wailed, and hit everything around them.

"Stop it!" My Hero let go of Daimon's arms so that he could turn his back to them. He raised his right hand and slammed it against his shaking left arm, before My Hero joined in with its own fists. "Stop shaking! I'm not scared! I'm the hero! The hero of all children! I have to be like Dio! Strong like Dio! Never afraid of death or being killed! Never afraid of battle!" Both he and the Stand hit slowly but firmly. Even on the ground, Rohan could see bruises being left. "Weak! Weak! Weak! Useless! Useless! Useless!"

"That's enough...please..." Komaru begged, Fukawa on her right unable to do anything but watch in horror as well.

"He's the real deal." Rohan whispered to himself.

This was the twist! The child who thought himself the leader, but still couldn't control his body's instincts. He wasn't some emotionless blank slate, nor was he the stereotypical 'do horrible things with child-like joy' archetype. The abuse he suffered was probably physical in nature, and now he was repeating it to himself.

Once, Rohan himself might have been shocked at his current mood. At the thrill in his blood at the sight of Daimon's breakdown. But this wasn't the sick joy in the suffering of another but amazement that someone in this world was breaking out of their mould. After so many years of disappointment and failure, finally Rohan was seeing something new! Something that inspired him!

This was what he needed to truly start fighting again! To feel like this world was more than some prison he was stuck in for all time!

A whole minute of self-abuse passed before he finally stopped. Daimon's left arm was now covered in purple bruises and barely seemed to move in contrast to its earlier shivering. The crowd were still roaring their approval for their hero's self-loathing just as much as they did for the blood of the adults. It didn't matter to them. They were just following orders.
Daimon stood to face them, eyes watering from the pain, as My Hero stood behind him in a heroic pose. Bandages seeped out from the armour and began to wrap themselves around Daimon's arm, one second they gripped it as tightly as an anaconda on its prey, and then the next second they seemed to sink into his skin.

The bruises began to disappear. Not all of them, and not entirely for those affected, but they were disappearing.

"I controlled it. Just like Dio told me to. I controlled my fear. Now it's all gone." Daimon stuttered the words out. Whether out of pain, fear, or madness was unknown. "Now it's ready for the battle."

The Hero of the Warriors of Hope released a long and broken laugh.

Komaru's face was streaked with tears and her whole body was wobbling. We Built This City had emerged but was covering hazel eyes as if to make it go away. "We're not Demons. We won't hurt you. So please just stop."

"It's no use. They're insane, maybe before Dio even met them. Living and dying doesn't mean anything to them." Fukawa readied her taser and kept a grip on the scissors in her hands. The green mist of Smells Like Teenage Spirit seeped from the blades. "We have to fight them to the end."

"All I need is for him to see either a manuscript of my work, or any drawing of Heaven's Door. It can even be in the air." Rohan said, readying his pen. Three on one would make this easy.

"Like I'll let you get that close!" Daimon raised his right arm and snapped his fingers.

From his right, among the audience, a console came flying out into the air and straight towards him. Catching it, throwing it to the ground, and pulling a lever, Daimon somehow made the ground below shake from something. All Rohan needed to see was the golden drill burst from the ground to begin running back with Komaru and Fukawa.

The machine looked like a giant version of My Hero with two exceptions. The first was the drills it had instead of hands and the second was the massive Murralsee face on its chest. It didn't stop the machine from moving backwards and crouching so that Daimon could walk on top of its head. My Hero was right behind Daimon, holding him steady, and laughed with its master.

"Mark Guyver and My Hero together can't be beat. We're the unstoppable trio." Daimon boasted as he toyed with the levers. Mark Guyver's drills began to whirr loud enough that it almost drowned out the crowd itself.

"Foul play! This is foul play!" Fukawa screamed.

"What do we do?" Komaru asked, looking to Rohan and Fukawa for guidance. Rohan resisted the urge to snap at her.

She could be a great protagonist, if she only had a spine and the will to do something for herself.

"You two keep it off me while I draw in close enough. If I can use Heaven's Door, I can take him out in one punch." Rohan didn't know what Genocider Syo was like, only her profile for research purposes, but he didn't trust her to handle this properly.

All he had to do was knock the kid out and then use Heaven's Door. Them he'd be able to see what he could find out about escape routes.

"We can't just beat up kids!" Komaru whined. Did she realise where the hell they were.
"It's the only chance we've got, Omamu. Besides, your Hacking Gun that Master gave you is up against a machine. I'm sure it'll work." Fukawa spoke with a rare determination, glaring straight at Daimon. Rohan counted the seconds before she inevitably ruined the moment. "Or not." She muttered as an aside.

"Why don't you sound more confident?"

"If you don't think you can do it, then fine. Just give me the mega-phone and I can handle the machine myself."

"Fukawa won't let me!"

"Because he's untrustworthy. Don't give him a hostage!"

Rohan Kishibe restrained the urge to assault the two girls and instead focused on the Mark Guyver.

My Hero's powers seemed to include healing, but Daimon's words said something different. Fast, tough, and strong. Could it do all three at the same time? Or was it at different times? Whichever one it was, he had to keep his guard up no matter what. He wasn't going to be stuck in this city while it burnt to the ground and he certainly wasn't going to die here.

He was going to live, get out with his manga, get the publishing back on track, and then begin work on the next part. His big send-off to Dark Pink Boy. It'd just be seven years of seeing what the readers think of it and seeing if there was any hope for manga.

But first he, Komaru, and Fukawa had to win this fight.

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On top of a roof of a nearby building, three figures watched the trio who was having some kind of debate outside the subway entrance. It seemed like they had some bruises and cuts on them, but none of them looked as bad as they should have been. It might have been impressive if it weren't obvious that their teamwork was atrocious.

But who could blame them? It was hard to coordinate when only two people could actually harm the big machine while the third kept trying to get close. 'My Hero' hadn't just been a healer. It could move in the blink of an eye for one moment and then hit like a truck the next. Not to mention that both it and its user were on top of the Mark Guyver itself.

It took all three of them everything they had to destroy that robot. Once the Mark Guyver became a raging drill-shaped inferno, there was no way that the kid's Stand could have protected it in time. At least, that was what Murray had told the others from his scouting mission. He had managed to sneak into one of the leaders' arenas and watched the whole thing happen.

That was the whole reason that the rescue team had split up, two of them staying on the ground floor while the rest moved up high, all to see just who these people were.

The girl in glasses and the man in the headpiece kept arguing and sniping whenever they could, you didn't need to hear them to tell, and the girl in the middle was trying to play peace-maker. What she got as thanks was two sharp tongues attacking her.
Hiroko kept a watch on them. Sure, she didn't have Haiji's binoculars or Murray's self-proclaimed super-vision skills, but she had a few years on both men and had instincts to guide her. The instincts of a mother seeing if her son was making friends, and of a delinquent planning a fight with some posers. That was enough to match even a robot like Murray.

She wouldn't make a fight out of it though. Murray was naive about these things, which made sense for a machine that only had a few days of self-awareness. Not like the horde that was tearing this place down.

"The poor girl. She keeps being bullied by those two." Murray said, shaking his head at the sight of the girl in glasses and the man with a strange hair-piece scolding the girl at the centre. Hiroko agreed. She looked too cute to seem so dejected. "Shameful what young people do nowadays. Isn't it, Haiji?"

"It's not like she's doing anything about it. She could at least stand up for herself." The Resistance's fearless leader replied, not taking his eyes away from the binoculars as he surveyed the scene around them.

"Give her a break, Haiji. Look at the bracelet," Hiroko said, letting out a last bit of smoke as her cigarette ran out. "Poor girl's probably stuck in this hell-hole."

She felt a bit of pride when she saw the girl perk up, even if the other two around her weren't so happy about it. Good for her. Don't let the situation and mean words of others keep you down, that's what Hiroko taught her son and look at him now. It was nice to see someone else live that way.

Especially after everything that happened these last few days. Months in Hiroko's case.

"Does the mission change?" Murray asked. His head turned with a mechanical whine as he stared down at Haiji. "You are the leader here."

Hiroko watched him think. Haiji may have led these little expeditions but he rarely took risks like these. She wouldn't be surprised if they were left to fend on their own for a while.

"...No. If Ishimaru is trapped in there, then a Stand user is trapped in there. If we want to get everyone out, we'll need all the help we can get from the victims of these kids." Haiji replied, removing the binoculars and standing up. The three of them were waiting by a roof of a building facing the subway entrance that the girl and her friends had just entered. He turned to Hiroko. "Is the back-up team ready to move in? I know where they'll probably head. We can meet them up after securing Ishimaru."

"Cool head as always." She said, offering a slight smile. Hiroko even winked at Haiji. "You know she has a soft-spot for you. Doing all this and letting her tag-along to find her kid."

"If another child managed to avoid the Murralsee then we'll need their help. If the people back at the base have an issue with pragmatism, they can take it up with us." Haiji replied. It might have seemed too robotic, but Hiroko knew how some young men could create when an older woman came onto them. Plus he wasn't the kind of guy who put pleasure before business. "Is Smoke On The Water ready?" He asked.

"Yeah. Ishimaru will recognise it too." Hiroko prayed that he was safe. When this game had started, both had travelled together for a few hours before getting split up. After she found the Resistance, she had made it a priority to get out and gather the others on this little Kill List. She'd been lucky that Haiji and Murray had a similar idea and let her tag along. "How about you two? That last mission didn't exactly go smoothly for you, Murray."
"So long as there are people in need, I am ready to assist." Murray replied, the bright blue-white armour contrasting completely with the stealth element they had going for them. Not that the hero of the Resistance knew much about subtlety.

Still, the injuries he got from each run was starting to concern her. It was right to save everyone you could, but ignoring how it was tearing off parts of your armour every time was something else.

Haiji sighed and stood up from his crouching position, dusting himself off. Neither his coat nor his hair moved that much against the wind, but Hiroko could tell that he wasn't exactly pleased by how either moved. She had the feeling that he'd have gotten a hair-cut if he wasn't constantly leading these rescue missions. Not that Hiroko minded; leaders were meant to stand out.

It was just a shame that he could be so dour and boring. You couldn't talk to the guy without feeling like he was keeping you at a distance. Still, considering everything that happened, maybe he just didn't want to form links with anybody. If you didn't get too attached then you didn't collapse when they died.

Better than what was happening in the base.

It wasn't right; what those kids were doing. Even if they were only kids, they should have known about basic decency. It was enough to bring back some of that dark energy from her delinquent days that motherhood had otherwise smothered. But Hiroko had to keep her cool for the team. She couldn't let them down now because she had a hot head.

Hiroko was surprised that Haiji didn't order the television screen showing those cruel tortures be destroyed. Though, going by the looks on some people, they'd have rioted if that happened. They wanted to know if their loved ones were safe, even if the answer was obvious. So the TV stayed to bring more despair.

Haiji provided the brains, but the entire camp would have collapsed if Murray hadn't been their heart. There wouldn't be a camp if it wasn't for Murray.

"Murray's right. We can't afford to worry about minor injuries when people are getting killed around us. A leader's got to be ready to take the risks he expects others to. If we can secure Ishimaru and the three of them, it'll be worth a few scars and bruises."

"Easy for you to say, with your Stand. Not everyone's is so suited for fighting Murralsees." Hiroko replied. Smoke On The Water was good, but it was nothing compared to Haiji's. The thought of its appearance made her smile coyly. "It's too bad she can't see your Stand either. It's definitely got a cuteness-appeal to it." She said teasingly.

Haiji's Stand emerged to regard her words, its feline-style face tilting to the side and looking completely neutral. It was the same as its master. Hiroko waved to see if there would be a reaction but the Stand simply ignored her and went back to scouting out the area as Haiji probably wanted it to.

That's Killer Queen for you. Cold as ice. Hiroko thought to herself. It didn't mean she wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of its power. There were too many times where those bombs had been the difference between life and death during the recovery missions.

A few minutes passed after the three entered the subway, the male of the group insisting on everyone carrying the crate, before Haiji felt confident that they weren't going to see any Murralsee pop out to flank them. Haiji pulled out a walkie-talkie and pressed down on the button.
"Move out." He commanded.

She had heard that he was the President of Towa Group's kid but those were the moments where she couldn't believe he wasn't already President. It was like the kid had memorised the book on leadership skills and had it imprinted into his brain. Hiroko even couldn't disagree with the less tactically wise decisions.

After seeing Shinobu cry like that, begging for someone to help her find her kid again, she'd have honestly thought less of Haiji if he hadn't agreed to bring her along to look for the kid while they searched for adult survivors. If Hiroko was ten years younger, or at least didn't have a son closer to Haiji's age than she was, she might have given him a shot as well.

He'd have to trim those fingernails first. Gonna put somebody's eyes out, if he isn't too careful.

Masaru Daimon/My Hero: Retired

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**Stand Stats**

**We Built This City**

*User: Komaru Naegi*

**Stats**

- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: C
- Range: C
- Durability: A
- Precision: C
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**

Creates shield around user that cannot be penetrated but user cannot escape from. At full-power, the Shield is air-tight and even outlasts user itself. Stand can be deployed towards those within 10m range of user but must be de-activated if already in use.

???

**My Hero**

*User: Masaru Daimon*

**Stats**

- Destructive Power: B
- Speed: B
- Range: C
- Durability: B
- Precision: D
- Developmental Potential: C
Abilities
User can heal from wounds suffered and lessen pain from attacks. Directly relative to level of ‘will to fight’.

Can enhance attacks by self directly or indirectly. Directly relative to level of ‘will to fight’.

Stand is capable of increasing strength, speed, or endurance at cost of other two.

Run For Home
User: Yuta Asahina
Stats
Destructive Power: D
Speed: B
Range: E
Durability: D
Precision: C
Developmental Potential: C

Abilities
User is capable of running on any surface so long as they maintain or increase pace.
It was good to be hated.

Jataro once spent so much time trying to get people to like him, and failing, that it used to drive him mad. He'd create cute things, cool things, and even useful things, and give them to people as gifts. He had once hoped that the people he loved would see them and then they'd see him too.

But they didn't like the things he made. They smashed them, threw them away, and even hit him with them, while screaming about how wretches can't make cute, cool, or useful things. All they did was leech off people and take away their dreams from them.

Even just looking at his face was enough to make them disgusted. It was a miracle that they didn't kill themselves out of horror at its hideousness.

It used to make Jataro cry, which would make them hurt him more, or just throw him away and ignore him, for a long time. Why couldn't he not be hated? Why did he have to have a face so ugly that he needed a sticky and stuffy leather mask? He could have made a nicer one, one with colours and patterns, but they wouldn't let him.

That was when he found peace of mind.

Some people were destined to be hated and those people were him. If they didn't hate him, then there'd be no reason for him to exist, and everyone would ignore him. People saying they liked him only did it so he'd go away. It was the angry people that hit Jataro—even when he was crying—that truly acknowledged him.

For a while, he lived by that code. He did everything he could to stay how he was so that the people he loved would hate him. If they hated him, then it meant that they remembered him. Expecting love from them was impossible and would only make him sadder. Once he learnt his lesson, their hatred was as nice as the drumming sound when a washing machine was on.

It wasn't all nice. Jataro sometimes felt happy when the Hope's Peak Elementary teachers praised him for his Arts and Crafts and forgot that he was supposed to enjoy hate, not love. So he had to sabotage himself, and others, to get those teachers to hate him again. It was better than waiting for them to turn against him. To accidentally see his true face and claw out their own eyes.

It was even better when his parents heard about it and hated him more. Jataro knew that his parents wouldn't have been happy if they heard of the good things he did. They'd have felt love and hate mix together and that was no good. It was like putting salt on a slug. Better to keep them separate.
It may have hurt, but it was better than nothing.

Jataro only now realised what a shame it was that he never realised that his parents could have shared their hate with each other. Before, they hated him individually. His father was out more so couldn't hate him as much as his mother did. She was so caring to make him wear the mask. Now he never took it off!

That was why he was so thankful for Dio for giving him Judas Priest. Jataro didn't cry when the Arrow stabbed him, he thought Daimon and Kotoko did when it was their turn but they told him to stop lying, so Dio said he was a good boy. He said that he'd be able to help Dio give everyone peace of mind.

Everyone thought they were different; their ideas of peace of mind, but they weren't. Jataro simply accepted his fate that he would be hated by all but the kindest and greatest of people. Normally, he hated it when people lied and pretended to like him, but Dio was different.

He had torn off Jataro's mask and looked him in the eye. It had been amazing! Dio was somehow able to gaze into the disgusting tapestry that was Jataro face and didn't even blink. He even smiled! Jataro had cried and asked Dio how he was able to withstand such an ugly thing. Dio simply told him that this was the power of the man who would bring Heaven.

Jataro still wore his mask. Dio wasn't like the demons or children. He was someone who stood above the world itself, immune to the rules that governed humans, but that meant only Dio could be trusted with seeing his face. Not even the other Warriors of Hope could see it, lest he kill his friends.

It was only because they-and Dio's friend-were here that he didn't take off his mask. His parents always hated it when he took off the mask, saying that it was hard to breath or that it hurt, yet he couldn't bask in it now. Jataro couldn't be selfish in front of Dio.

"You did it, Jataro. You've shown that I, Dio, was right to grant you this power." Dio stood next to Jataro as the two watched over the bodies. "Judas Priest's power is amazing. It was good that you aimed true. Such hatred needed to be expressed."

"It was because you helped, Dio." Jataro said. He never knew how to take compliments. Even if it was from Dio, it felt weird. His stomach got all flighty and everything. "Now they know what it's like to hate each other. I just wish they were here to say thank you."

"It'd be hard to say thanks without tongues, Jataro." Shingetsu muttered.

"Probably sound like this." Daimon started making weird mouth noises and began chasing Kotoko around. Monaca giggled, Shingetsu sighed, and Dio's friend didn't say anything.

"Do you feel peace of mind, Jataro? The Demons who spat upon their own creation are now dead? You have seen the depths of their hatred expressed fully and have triumphed. Just as I knew you would." Dio put a hand on Jataro's head and smiled.

"I always knew they hated me. It was like the lukewarm milk I always got. Went down my throat all thick." Jataro said, ignoring the choked sob behind him. His expression lightened. "But now I got to see and hear it in full! I always knew they were holding back their hate to punish me. Not any more."

Dio hummed in approval and stood up. His friend was starting to cry again. Jataro was fine with
that both Dio leaving him and the crying since it kept the world in order. Dio had favourites who weren't Jataro and it showed that his friend hated him.

The only problem with this picture was that his parents weren't alive to hate him anymore.

It had truly been a fight between demons. Jataro's parents didn't need long with the glue before they went from using their fists to their nails, screaming of how the other ruined their life by making the other have a child, and even tearing out chunks of flesh with their teeth. His mother managed to win the fight after sacrificing her left thumb to get the right one nice and keep into his father's eye-socket.

She always liked her nails sharp and long. They must have reached brain since his father didn't last long after she jammed it in. Unfortunately, her neck had taken a pretty big bite before she went for the eye-gouging, even if Judas Priest left her little choice.

Both of them died cursing the other. Both of them died cursing Jataro's very existence. Both of them died filled with acidic hatred.

Just how Jataro needed it.

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Once upon a time, there was a boy who just wanted a normal life.

It was an easy wish to grant. The only thing abnormal about him, to the public eye, was that his parents were a bit older than most were when having a child. It might have been a source of bullying, if the boy wasn't friendly enough to avoid conflict, or willing to stand up for himself enough for people to know where the line was.

Teachers, taught since they were children to respect their elders, knew better than to scold for defending an elder's honour, especially that of parents who did nothing to incur society's disapproval. At a time of declining demographics, child-bearing should be encouraged!

The boy was also talented enough to be applauded but not enough so to be applauded out more than politeness. Participation, fourth and fifth place medals, and even a third place trophy or two. Grades that were just good enough to get him into a well-regarded, but not top-ranking, university where he graduated along the top-middle of his class.

It was a year where the average had dipped, you see.

With such a record, it should have been easy for the boy to enjoy a normal life, but for three things.

The first was that he had an unappealing habit, if he was denied something he wanted and could do nothing, and that was nail-biting. Not biting the tips of them, as most nail-biters did, but into the middle of them. It was mostly something that happened at home, in private, but the results did draw attention at times. Uncommon, even alienating, but not too damaging.
The second was that he had an imaginary friend that was real. Feline in appearance and a bizarre name; this imaginary friend had been with the boy for as long as he could remember. Why? It was a question no one knew the answer to. All that the boy knew was that it had the power to make things and people he wanted to go away, go away forever.

The third was more a mixture of two things. Alone, a fetish for women's hands-discovered upon looking at the Mona Lisa-might have been weird but nothing to detract from an ordinary life, given a trusting sexual partner. Who didn't have an embarrassing secret? So long as it wasn't anything against the morals of society or its laws. But there it was. The second thing that ruined any chance of a normal life.

This boy was not only sexually excited by attractive hands, but he also acted on this fetish by way of murder. The use of his invisible companion would make the woman go away and only leave her hand for the boy to use as he wished. The boy grew into a man having killed, planned to kill, and would kill for years to come.

Yoshikage Kira aspired for a normal life, but also one where he would be free to live as he wished.

Normality required the sacrifice of desires. A price that Kira never thought he could, would, or should pay. In all other areas, from work to daily schedules to diets, he was normal. Why should one single thing detract from his average lifestyle?

Across his 20s, Kira lived like this, killing dozens of young women and never being caught. Who could catch a killer who left no body? Not even an Ultimate Detective could solve a crime that they were not aware of.

But they would be made aware of it.

Takaaki Ishimaru thought he was ordering a sandwich on the day that he discovered a bloody nail inside the bag he ordered. His superiors thought it was just an inconsiderate fellow customer, or shop-worker, mixed with the delusions of a man who was spoilt by a disgraced Prime Minister of a father. The shop insisted it was a customer's fault.

It had only been by cruel luck that, at the same time as Ishimaru was mocked by his partners, a grieving mother recognised the unique pattern of the nail painting. It had been what attracted Kira to the young woman in the first place, taking care to re-apply the paint when it chipped, and it was what gave Ishimaru credibility.

A mere police officer with a disgraced legacy was nothing. A woman whose uncle's friend was a member of the Diet was more than nothing. She was worth an investigation.

It took six months for the dominoes to begin falling. People began to whisper of how the missing person rates in one particular town were far higher than the other. How the missing persons were all young women. How all the young women had features that made their hands stand out.

It took one tabloid for people to begin asking about 'The Hime-Hand Killer'. Was this a copy-cat of Genocider Syo? Was this Genocider Syo going for the nation's women? Or another killer entirely? A nation began to talk and theorise. The Ultimate Detective was called in.

Yoshikage Kira began to panic. Not simply because his crimes were being noted, even if none of the leading investigators knew who he was, but because of something else. Instinct honed by years of planning the murders just properly enough that there were no unexpected witnesses told him that he
was being followed.

Takaaki Ishimaru only had a hunch that the nail came from the man who had been three places ahead of him in line that day. It was all he had to go on after being kicked off the case. He shared his theory with his partner and got laughed out the room. If he wanted to catch this killer, he'd need some proof to give to the Detective. Surely at least his son's classmate might give him the benefit of the doubt?

Only a killer of such evil and madness would make Ishimaru defy his morals and aim for nepotism. But if it saved lives, he'd give up his honour any day. He was getting close as well. Kira knew nothing about his identity. He was getting close as well!

That was when he was kidnapped by the servants of Ultimate Despair; a cult dedicated to destroying the world in the name of Dio Brando. Captured to force his son to contemplate murdering his classmates, Ishimaru had to accept that Yoshikage Kira slipped through his fingers.

Kira fled to Towa City. The chaos of the The Tragedy, or The World's End as some called it, gave him an excuse to flee to what was already known as an oasis of calm. An official excuse came as a transfer to the home offices of the Towa Group to who he owed ten years of loyal service as the standard desk-worker.

The months went by and Kira began to calm himself again. As the world outside burned and fought, the police were more concerned with keeping Ultimate Despair away from their beloved city, and the Hime-Hand Killer was nothing compared to fear of poison gas. The hand he took as a calming measure was gone for about a month before he killed again.

Everything was back on track. Yoshikage Kira lived a normal life as a middle-man within the home offices of the Towa Group. It was one of his jobs to introduce new workers to their stations and that was the only special thing that people knew about him. Yes, he now knew of Stands, as did the whole world after Dio Brando's death, but who would suspect him of having one?

How long had the police been watching him? How long had they had someone keep an eye out for him? How long did that goddamn beat-cop spend observing Kira with his 'girlfriend' until they were sure he was the Hime-Hand Killer?

They were smart. It was a normal office-day, Kira was introducing a new worker (why the hell would he have a scruffy beard on his first day of work?) to his station when the worker pulled out a gun, a badge, and demanded he get down on the ground. All this in front of everyone.

They had used his need for normality against him. People were already taking out their mobile-phones, police were bursting into the office, and everyone heard the words 'You are under arrest for suspicion of 53 counts of homicide' across the room. What use would there be of Killer Queen beyond a fight to the death? It was over! Kira had forever been denied a normal life!

"You killed Takaaki, didn't you?" The arresting police officer barked. "I laughed at him. Called him dumb, crazy, all those names. Made him go out alone when he needed back-up. Should have realised those assholes up top had been laughing and spitting on him from the start. Booking you is my way of apologising to him. Making him rest in-"

That was when the Murralsee came into the picture.

Kira spent minutes laying on the ground, handcuffs tightly locked behind him, when he realised that the police were going to die. That it might be safe to use Killer Queen.
None of the machines were able to stand up to Killer Queen. Getting out of the room was easy enough when nearly everyone was busy being slaughtered by androids but that left other questions.

Where would he go now?

Once again, luck was on his side as salvation came in the form of a crazed man running towards and then slamming into his left.

Haiji Towa had likely broken his arm in the chaos of all this, and having it crash against the ground hadn't helped, as he screamed in pain. The young heir to the Towa Group didn't like that one bit. Fear and fury became one as he screamed at Kira, telling him to watch where he was going, before he recoiled his hand from Kira's shirt out of fright.

A shaking finger pointed to Killer Queen besides Kira, making him realise that Haiji could see his Stand, and that meant only one thing. He barely had time to react when a pure black humanoid with white voids where its eyes should be emerged. Its palms held one massive suction-cup, pulsating in a way that made Kira recoil. Haiji screamed while Killer Queen tried to touch the Stand and charge it.

All that accomplished was a hand going through the Stand itself and leaving Kira open for the thing to shove its right palm into his face. There was no pain felt, but only a sucking force that was much like when you put your hand in a vacuum cleaner. Only it felt like everything on and around Kira was being sucked away. As if it was taking his soul itself.

There was then a powerful blowing force and Kira felt something attach itself to not only his head but his whole body as well. A firm pressing force on his face. Where he felt naked for a few brief moments, there was warmth again. Only this warmth felt baggy. As if his clothes had been stretched out.

The Stand withdrew and Kira saw himself lying on the ground. No. He saw a man with his face, hair, and apparently too-small clothes lying on the ground but that was definitely not him. Kira had no time to think or react. He could see that Haiji Towa was only looking more afraid and furious.

"Damnit! This fucking Stand. How could she do this to us?" Haiji said, taking Kira aback with the sound of his own voice. The heir leapt up and grabbed the edges of Kira's shirt with his uninjured arm. His greater height and weight made up for the single limb. "If you hadn't gotten in the way, we wouldn't be in this-ver-

Three shots and Haiji's eyes widened. Blood trickled from the side of his mouth and whatever light was there vanished in an instant. The grip loosened and Haiji collapsed onto the ground. Kira turned to see that the scruffy-bearded cop, bleeding heavily from the head, was lying by a shut wooden door that held the Murralsee back. Had he just gotten out of that room?

Was Kira truly blessed by fate itself that the cop hadn't seen the exchange in faces and clothes?

"If...I hadn't gotten there...he'd have killed you. He's got a Stand...Mister Towa..." The cop grunted out, letting his arm drop after seeing that Haiji-who he assumed was Kira-wouldn't get up.

"I know." Kira replied, reaching a hand out to the police officer in need. "If I'm going to escape, I'll need a hand."

"Sure thing." The officer said, taking the hand offered. Killer Queen activated the bomb that had
been planted at that moment.

That final look of horror was all Kira needed to know that fate was on his side. The cop who had spent weeks, if not months, tracking him down, was undone by two events that had astronomically low odds of happening. Kira had truly been blessed! He was free!

A Murralsee jumped from behind him, not knowing that Killer Queen had already detected it, and his Stand punched the helmet of the Murralsee. The machine exploded without an issue.

*But these clothes are a problem.* Kira had thought to himself. *When his Stand swapped our clothes, it didn't swap our physiques as well. This is going to be a problem.*

"You!" A voice cried out from behind him Kira turned to see another Murralsee, only this one was different, in having a bluish-white armour coating and a heads of another Murralsee in each hand. "You may not be Haiji Towa, but I will save you regardless. But I must know that you will not betray me!"

"Do you know who I am?"

"Who you were before all this does not matter. In a land where the innocent are murdered, all that matters is that we unite and fight against it." The blue Murralsee declared. "I had hoped to save the heir to the Towa Group, but I suppose even a killer is better than a corpse. Swear that you shall not kill another innocent and I shall protect you."

"Keep this secret and I'll do whatever is needed." Kira replied.

Thus an alliance emerged. Yoshikage Kira threw away his old identity and took on the role of Haiji Towa, leader of the Resistance in Towa City and one of the guardians of the adults living in fear of the children. The blue Murralsee, calling itself 'Murray', became known as the angel of the Resistance for its stirring words and refusal to give up on saving the adults.

The two formed a deadly pair. A base hidden in the sewers was prepared for the survivors found and people were willing to put their faith in the heir to the company that had done so much for their city and world. It worked even better when stories of defying the odds and saving whole groups became known.

In a single day, Haiji Towa and Murray would encounter a woman named Hiroko Hagakure. She told them of the Warriors of Hope and the Demon Hunting Game. Of her Stand and those others being hunted that held Stands but needed help. She herself could escape the bracelet, and did, but others couldn't and were scared.

The rescue team that Haiji Towa and Murray led had gained a new recruit. Two Stand users together were a deadly threat and they gathered others willing and able to fight. Their objectives were to find survivors, supplies, and other Stand users, all in the hopes of surviving another day.

It was an abnormal role for the man who dreamed of a normal life, but he had no choice. Yoshikage Kira could never lead a life again and Haiji Towa would never be normal.

What he could be was a certain type of abnormal. The abnormality of a leader. The type who led from the front, who put others before himself, and carried the burdens of the group on his back. Closed off from others because of all he saw. Weighed down by guilt of those he couldn't save.
Even accepting the illogical from a guilt-ridden woman who wanted to save her son. Even accepting those feared and scorned by the others. Kira became everything that was normally expected of a leader in this time.

Because the moment would come. The moment where he would find a way to escape this city and cast off his identity. His voice was no longer his, but Haiji Towa was only really known by those within the company and even those were only by appearance.

Add a few facial burn-scars, shave off the hair and beard, and Haiji Towa looked like a great many people in a post-Tragedy world. All he had to do was go with the flow of events. Simply keep calm in this nightmare, no matter how much he yearned to scream and howl, and his moment would come. His luck would see him through.

He would have his normal life back again. No matter who had to die for it.

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"I'm telling the truth." Rohan was speaking through clenched teeth now. How hard was it for them to understand? "This isn't my world."

"Wow, is that what you'd tell your parents when you wouldn't leave the room? Were the kids in school mean to you? Tie you up on the jungle gym because someone lost their lunch-money?" Fukawa teased, leering at him.

"Shoving your own past into other people's stories, the sign of an author trying to compensate for a lack of real-world experience." Rohan barely even looked at her as they marched down the subway station. "Your books are nothing more than fan-fiction."

"Why you-"

"Can't you two stop fighting? It's really uncomfortable." Komaru begged. They had just gone through a whole room of Murralsee and it seemed she was still jumpy.

"Life's uncomfortable. Now more than ever." Rohan replied.

At least she almost believed his story. Or just pretended to until she heard Fukawa taunting her. Rohan accepted that it was a strange story; hearing of a world before this one and that someone survived its end.

Rohan himself only found out when he finished that last chapter, handed it in, only to find that the editor had changed. The entire building had even changed. The staff's big names were the same talentless hacks as ever, but there were smaller names as well. The city itself had changed too. He even changed, going from his early thirties to mid-twenties.

He wasn't supposed to have made it to this world. Everyone knew it. Somehow he made it to this place instead of his own. But he was in the office, he had the manga, and it was still out there. Who
else had been occupying that office, if not him?

So he was at least able to keep his job. In this world, where he was meant to live was now a block of flats that he had no intention of staying in. All of Morioh Town as he knew it was gone. Not the sights. Not the name. Not even the people.

That had been harder to swallow.

No one responded to my call. How long had he spent wracking his memories for old stories and what he knew of the residents? All of that had seemed to be for nothing. Koichi, Jotaro, even that idiot Josuke. Everyone's gone.

It had been years since then. Rohan had moved on from his attempts to reach out and try to find any survivors of the old world since then. Morioh Town had been what finally got him moved to Seinen Jump; the sales hadn't done well with the younger audiences and monthly schedules gave more time for research.

He had a new goal for the short-term. Finding the editor who had decided that he didn't need to know about the end of the world. The fact that Towa City was probably the only place where people read his manga. Questions were going to be answered.

Rohan might have dwelt on it more, as he, Komaru, and Fukawa stalked down the subway searching for an escape route, when the sounds of clashing metal echoed across the building. It was coming from ahead and to the right of where they were. Just by the exit of the subway itself!

The three of them moved towards the sound and readied themselves. Heaven's Door might have been ineffective against the Murralsee themselves, but he could still use it on the kids. They had some kind of control over the machines and might even give the trio some breathing space.

What they saw blew their minds.

The Murralsee were fighting each other. That wasn't entirely accurate; it was more one Murralsee, this one painted a bright light-blue, fighting against a whole pack of Murralsee by itself. It looked more damage and battle-weary than the other normal Murralsee, but it was taking some with it. Scraps of destroyed Murralsee littered its surroundings when the blue Murralsee finally noticed them.

"Get away!" A metallic male voice commanded. The blue Murralsee ducked a right hook from a regular Murralsee to its left and used a leg-sweep to send it to the ground. "I'll hold them off for as long as I can, but you must run! Search for the others. Survivors like you. They're here right now!" He judo-flipped another Murralsee trying to attack from behind.

"That Murralsee..." Rohan muttered to himself. "Why it's fighting the others?" Traps were too complex for these enemies; both the kids and the Murralsee.

"Probably a trap to lure us in. That's how these machines work. You know they were meant to be for home defence. It's just now they're using their minds to kill everyone." Fukawa was ever the cynic.

"But it's outnumbered. And losing." Komaru said. That was true. The blue Murralsee had been struck to the side and now all seven of the remaining Murralsee were getting their licks in. It irritated even Rohan to see this.

"Let's just go, Komaru." Fukawa said, her voice slightly harder to make the command clear. It did its
job on Komaru, who was about to turn back with nothing more than an apologetic look.

*Wasted potential.* Rohan thought to himself as he began to sketch out Heaven's Door in the air, while Fukawa was still looking in his direction. The command to throw a scissor right at one of the Murralsee was written before the 'Ultimate Writer' could even protest.

It was a poor throw, Heaven's Door could only defy physics so much, but it at least managed to make a mark. Alone, the scissor might have made a slight scratch on the skin of the Murralsee furthest to the right. But Smells Like Teenage Spirit was fuelled by the passion of love and hate.

And Fukawa had a lot of hate for the Murralsee.

The entire right arm of the Murralsee cracked open and sent it stumbling from the sudden shock. The blue Murralsee took its chance and smashed through the weak point to escape. The other Murralsee, along with those starting to march out from other hallways, however, noticed who had interrupted their play.

"It can't be," The blue Murralsee said, before pointing at the three of them. "To have shattered an entire arm with but a scratch. I misjudged your three! I thought your Stands wouldn't be suited for combat. My apologies, but please lend aid. So long as there are innocents plagued by this fight, I must fight!"

"Nothing for it." Rohan smirked as the Murralsee began to advance. Komaru readied her Hacking Gun, the resolute look on her face welcome after so long crying over the horrors in the subway tunnels.

"You bastard." Fukawa growled, but she readied the taser nonetheless.

It was short work for the two. Komaru's aim with the Hacking Gun as she managed to score more direct hits to the eyes of the Murralsee. Any danger to her was blocked by We Built This City summoning a shield for her. Fukawa, once she became Genocider Syo, moved through the metallic masses like it was a dance floor.

What Syo lacked in hate or love for the Murralsee, she made up for in pure precision as she sliced through the eye circuits.

The blue Murralsee itself fought as well. The stragglers in the back lines were torn apart by the spirit of the rogue machine; roaring with every blow it made. There was something different about this Murralsee. Something unique that made it a deadly warrior.

Not even a minute passed before the children fled. It was only natural when their toys were nothing more than circuits and wires.

"Such power! Such finesse! A modified megaphone and pair of scissors became like a shotgun and lightsaber in your hands. I must thank you for your aid. I do not know how long I could have kept on fighting until you fought them off." The blue Murralsee was speaking as it walked towards them. It only stopped to shake in place out of what seemed like self-shame, white eyes staring at the indentures on its body. "As a machine, I am bound by the limitations of my body, however much my heart yearns to fight on."

The reward for his words was Fukawa pointing a scissor-blade right at his face. Smells Like Teenage Spirit gathered by the edge of the blade. "Enough of that flowery stuff! How are you talking? What
do you want? You're with the kids, aren't you?"

"Such questions at a fast pace! It's as if I'm being interrogated by a police inspector. Still, it is only natural. My apologies for my rudeness, my lady," The blue Murralsee gave a slight bow as he introduced himself. "My name is Murray. I am a Murralsee; designed for defence and recovery. My AI was designed to be unique to other Murralsee as an experiment for performance improvement."

"My lady? Don't go thinking you can win me over with that kind of sweet-talk." Fukawa grumbled, even as she blushed to herself.

"He does look more like a hero than a monster. And he seems nice." Komaru smiled at 'Murray' who gave the closest thing to a smile back when his expression was built-in.

"Don't be fooled, Omaru. He's like a cheater in a gentleman's suit." Fukawa shivered with each word. She was looking at 'Murray' as if he was about to shoot lasers out of his eyes.

Rohan could only scoff at that. If he was trying to trick them, he'd have feigned vulnerability to lure them over and then attack Komaru before We Built This City activated. Fukawa was letting paranoia get to her, as she turned her attention to him.

Komaru was ready to interject when 'Murray' beat her to it.

"Please, do not fight on my accord." He said, before motioning to the tattered remains around him. "I was like these things once; all of us were sleeping until it was time to be activated. I only woke up an hour before the riots began a few days ago, newborn and confused. When I saw the butchery above, just a few days ago, a foul corruption within told me to go forth and kill. To hurt the innocent." He gripped his fists tightly as they shook. "But there was another voice inside me-the voice of my heart-that rejected it! It told me to go forth and protect! The purpose for which I was truly created."

He sounded so determined, so sure of himself. It almost made Rohan interested in him.

"You mean what your programming said." Fukawa replied, causing the Murralsee to lose some of its energy.

"Fukawa! That's too cruel." Komaru scolded.

Murray sighed. "No. It is a fair complaint, my lady. I imagine the three of you have seen great horrors. Normal rules of politeness shouldn't be rigidly observed without question." It looked up and towards Fukawa, a more confident tone entering its voice. "Besides, such rules are normally suspended for those with beauty."

"Don't think good taste will make us less suspicious." Fukawa's bark was let down by her blushing and almost flirting expression.

"It's because he doesn't have a sense of smell." Rohan was regretting not making Fukawa use the toilet water. It would have made her cleaner than she was right now.

An argument was about to break out again when steps echoed throughout the hallway. About three persons were running, two from ahead facing Murray and one to the opposite of where the three of them had emerged to help Murray. They were too light to have been Murralsees, but too heavy for children.
The first to arrive were the pair. One was wearing a mask and wearing a make-shift camouflage suit, holding an assault rifle, yet Rohan could see that this person had no idea on how to use it, and the other was without a mask. It made sense, as it'd otherwise keep her from smoking her cigarette.

Waist-length light pink hair, brown eyes, blue jacket over a white shirt, and black ripped jeans, the last a fashion choice rather than from the recent chaos. The cuts were too neat otherwise. What interested Rohan though was the way that the smoke from her cigarette was wafting back towards her. It twisted and turned softly inside her jacket.

The third arrived just after the two and was unmasked as well. Just like the pink-haired one, his black hair went down to his waist, black jacket with beige-furring to cover up a red-rose pattern shirt, and ripped jeans that had the unintended tears sewn up. His whole look was someone who had slept in their clothes but woke up realising they were late for a meeting and didn't change.

Stuck between looking casual but then trying to make it seem formal. It didn't help that his whole expression was practically blank. A complete contrast to the pink-haired woman's friendlier expression.

Still, Haiji Towa—who Rohan only knew as the son of the man who he 'convinced' to let use the Towa Group's nature experiments—probably had a rough time.

"Haiji, you're back!" The masked woman cried out. She ran over to his side and looked up to him. "Did you find the man we were looking for? Where are the others?" She asked, Rohan barely able to hear over Fukawa's mutterings.

"I found Ishimaru." Haiji replied, silencing Fukawa, before shaking his head. It was obvious what happened to the man, seeing as he wasn't with them.

"Damn it. Did they at least leave something?" The unmasked woman asked. Haiji didn't say anything, which told her enough. The unmasked woman bit into the cigarette in her mouth in frustration. "Shouldn't have let him out of my sight."

Murray was more emotive, smacking his right fist into his left palm. The clanging sound echoed throughout the area. "Curses! Those damn puppets...couldn't even leave a body."

Rohan felt uneasy. A sensation on his back, as if it was about to explode, had erupted whenever he looked at Haiji or the masked woman. But why? They were adults so they were probably fighting against the children as well.

It was when the masked woman took off the gas-mask, freeing her light brown hair tied in a ponytail, and shining brown eyes looked up to Haiji Towa as if he was the hero of the hour, that Rohan went cold. It couldn't be. This had to be a dream. A cruel, manipulative dream caused by a stress-filled mind.

But even if it was a dream, Rohan still couldn't control himself.

"Shinobu Kawajiri!" He shouted, causing all attention to fall to him.

Komaru broke the silence. "Rohan-sensei, do you know this person?" She asked.

She's the mother of the kid who helped me stop a serial killer twenty years ago. It was only twenty years for him. Shinobu looked the same age as when she had been tricked by Yoshikage Kira. He
only knew who she was because of what Hayato said about her, and she wouldn't recognise a manga artist.

It was those words that kept him from being too disappointed at the lack of recognition in her eyes.

"How do you know my name?" Shinobu asked, almost wary of him. It was barely a second when suspicion was replaced by frantic hope behind those eyes. "Have you seen a boy? About eleven years old, brown hair that goes down to his chin, looks a bit scrawny? He's called-

"Hayato." Rohan shouldn't have said that. He realised this when Komaru and Fukawa looked at him as if he was crazy.

"I thought you hadn't left your room in-"

Fukawa's mouth was rapidly covered up by Rohan's hand. His grip was tight enough that all she could do was try and gross him out by licking his hand and trying to bite down on his flesh. She only stopped when she accidentally bit her own tongue and howled in pain. Komaru's frown, accompanied by the looks from the others, were what convinced Rohan to finally let go.

Not that Fukawa seemed to appreciate it.

"We should talk about this in the base." Haiji said. That kept Fukawa from speaking. Of course the purveyor of smut would crush hard for a wealthy heir. The Towa heir looked around and seemed to concentrate, as if trying to hear for any loud foot-steps. "Too many Murralsee are about."

"A secret base?" Komaru sounded as if she was offered a lifetime's supply of candy. She turned to Fukawa and was practically bouncing in her steps. "Can we go with them? Can we, Fukawa?"

Rohan rolled his eyes. She could make her own decisions, couldn't she?

"A base? Probably some kidnapper's cove waiting to hold us hostage." Fukawa whispered to Komaru. One look at Haiji and her tone changed again. "Though maybe we should trust them."

"It's not like we've got much choice. Besides," Rohan turned to Haiji, who seemed to ignore both Fukawa and Shinobu giving him warm glances. There was something different about him. "We've got a lot to talk about."

"Great. I suppose we should introduce ourselves," The pink-haired woman said. She smiled at all three of them and pointed to herself. "I'm Hiroko Hagakure, you know Murray, Shinobu and Haiji, so now it's your turn."

"Oh, um, I'm Komaru Naegi, this is Touko Fukawa," Komaru said, completely ignoring Fukawa's quick gasp and hushed reprimands. Shinobu gasped and held her hands to her mouth when she heard that second name. Oh great, a reader of Fukawa's glorified fanfictions. "And this is Rohan Kishi-

A chorus of clanks cut her off. They were coming from the entrance just behind Murray, everyone backing up to build space between them and the advancing Murralsee, as they marched down the steps. It wasn't just regular ones. There were the one with sirens, the ones who had bombs strapped around their torso, and even shielded ones like back at the subway.

Rohan even spotted some of the Murralsee that were just heads attached to limbs and no torso. Junk Murralsee.
There were dozens of them, but they weren't fighting normal civilians. Rohan suspicions about Hiroko were confirmed when she breathed out and the smoke around her, on the cigarette, and even the thin air became to form a thick cloud around her that pooled across everyone's legs. Komaru and Fukawa panicked before realising that they were fine.

The front line of Murralsee, however, found that their legs weren't working properly. The smoke was somehow getting inside and, before anyone knew it, sparks and small explosions burst from their knees.

Fukawa's taser had enough power for one small rampage for Genocider Syo-who cackled as she took the field-and Komaru provided support with her Hacking Gun. Entire lines of Murralsee began to collapse as they charged ahead, either cut down by Syo's madness, Komaru's aim, or Hiroko's trap. It was almost comedic how the Murralsee were tripping over their own fallen comrades.

Murray was doing his best to help. Shinobu had tried to give support, but even she seemed to realise that she'd probably just cause friendly fire, before backing down. They were making decent enough progress, the Murralsee had even stopped marching through the subway entrance. Syo even turned back to Fukawa.

That was when one Murralsee, a Junk one at that, burst from the forming mound of robotic corpses. It was entirely focused on Shinobu, who tried to back up only to stumble to the floor.

"Killer Queen!" Rohan froze as a pebble flew into his sights and only just tapped against the Murralsee's side when it exploded. The explosion took out most of the Junk Murralsee's head before imploding on itself. Haiji rushed over to Shinobu's side and tried to help her up. "Are you alright? I'd have used it on the crowd, but I didn't want to hurt our allies. You understand, right?"

"Y-Yes." Shinobu replied. The hesitation was less from shock and more 'Haiji' being so close. It seemed too convenient how she slipped just before he was upright, slipping into his grip again.

"She's totally faking it. She's already got a kid and she's still trying to get it on." Fukawa hissed. If she thought no one would hear her, she thought wrong.

"What did you just say?" Shinobu's furious look was met by Fukawa's attempt at matching it.

"T-Those looks. It feels as if two lionesses are about to fight to the death!" Murray took a step back as Komaru gasped in shock.

'Haiji' just seemed annoyed at all the attention before Hiroko brought peace by pointing out that they had to leave now. The two groups decided to join up and head for this secret base that these newcomers were talking about. Fukawa was split between deriding them and trying to take Shinobu's place by 'Haiji's' side, while Komary was ecstatic at being able to go to a safe sanctuary.

Rohan? Rohan was saying nothing. He kept every last bit of his attention on 'Haiji Towa'. Shinobu, Hayato, both of those had to be a sign that some people made it to the new world. Rohan knew that there were others out there, even if he lost hope after Morioh Town's flop.

But he didn't expect this.

No. Not you. Koichi, Josuke, Tonio, Jotaro, Reimi, everyone else didn't make it. But you? It was a different name. Rohan didn't know if there was a Yoshikage Kira in this world, but that Stand. That Stand couldn't have been a coincidence. Not if Dio Brando made it here as well. Reimi said that Kira
and Killer Queen were seized by the hands in the alley. Sent into the afterlife. Did whatever end my world send them here?

Whatever it was, even if the man before him really was Haiji Towa, Rohan was keeping a close eye on him. He'd stay quiet, play nice, no reason to risk Heaven's Door when the other newcomers seemed dedicated to him, but he would watch. Watch for a sign, any sign, that this was Yoshikage Kira. If it was, then that would be when Rohan would make his move.

Even if this was another world, Rohan wouldn't let Yoshikage Kira pollute it as he once did the old one.

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"How did they beat us here?" Shinobu stuttered. It made sense than an old hag would have memory problems. The black-widow leaned against Haiji, trying to seduce him. "We can't trust them, Haiji. It's a trap."

"The old lady is right. We just should turn back." Fukawa said. As much as she didn't like to admit it, they couldn't risk playing with this stupid game. The kids beat them to wherever Murray-who she still didn't trust-was leading them and probably planted Murralsee to attack them.

Not that Shinobu appreciated it, she turned a glare to the Ultimate Writer. "Old lady? You disrespectful-"

"We can't turn back." Haiji's calm and collected voice silenced the shrew. "If they found this route, then we don't know if they've found the others. If we turn back, we're exiting their game and they'll be free to break their own rules. We don't know how many Murralsee are in the other pipes. This is also the shortest and-until now-the most reliable way back. If we make it through here, we can come back to clear them out. But right now, our priority is getting back as soon as possible and correcting this mistake."

"You're right." Shinobu admitted, biting her bottom lip.

Fukawa couldn't believe that such an idiot thought she'd be worth anything to someone like Haiji Towa. Someone of his stature and legacy needed a woman of refined taste and filled with youth, rather than some dead-beat's sloppy seconds. Shinobu Kawajiri was just misinterpreting basic kindness, far more than she deserved, as a sign of interest.

She needed to know her place.

"Ah, Haiji. My head...it feels so heavy and faint from all the fighting...could you please help me stay upright?" Fukawa added dramatic pauses to enhance the effect of her fake-woozeiness.

"Miss Fukawa, I can gladly be of assistance," Murray's unwelcome voice chimed in. Fukawa ignored Shinobu's smug look of triumph. "I was fitted with cooling measures."
"I'll help too." Komaru added. Gah! Didn't that girl understand subtlety?

"Not from you." Fukawa hissed, keeping her voice low. It did the job of scaring the two.

"Like a piranha on a finger!" Murray howled. He must have thought he was so smart with this whole act, but Fukawa wasn't fooled!

The Occult Idiot's far more useful mother ignored them and was muttering to herself. "How many shots does a skilled child hunter need to get rid of ten birds?" She asked, repeating the riddle given. Seconds passed before she sighed. "The answer's zero."

"What? The answer is clearly ten. He's skilled so it's one shot per bird." Shinobu being an idiot wasn't a surprise to Fukawa. Of course she'd go for the obvious bait answer.

"It's too obvious. He can just throw the gun and the birds'll get spooked." Hagakure was wrong as well. She was being too smart.

*The answer's obviously a hundred bullets. These kids just rigged the game so that the dumb answer that no one would answer is the right one.* Fukawa thought to herself. *Still, maybe it is zero. Or Mrs Unfaithful Wife might have a point.*

Haiji seemed undecided, but was clearly divided between whether to say it was ten or zero bullets needed, which left it to Hagakure and Shinobu to argue over. Murray even joined in by arguing that it might have been a single bullet, only for Haiji to shut it down magnificently. The gun-man was skilled but it'd be difficult for a hunting rifle to shoot through ten birds in a row.

That then opened an argument over what kind of gun and bullet were being used. Soon enough, they were all drowning in a sea of arguments over details and exact circumstances. What kind of birds were these? What was their exact position? Was this all a trap? How many Murralsee were in each pipe? The game laid forgotten as everyone kept on arguing.

Fukawa herself soon found herself verbally jousting with everyone over a wide span of topics. Whether they had the right answer, or if it was worth risking a wrong one, and if they could simply just fight their way through, it didn't matter. They were just going around and around in circles while the kid taunting them was having the time for their lif-

"Everyone!" A firm and powerful voice silenced everyone. Five pairs of eyes turned to Komaru who had an intensity about her form. Rohan stood behind her, back to back, with a fire of his own. Komaru even had the audacity of smirk and laugh at them, tapping the side of her head with her finger. "You're thinking like adults. Questions of skill, loopholes, types of guns and distance travelled. In a game created by children, you're selling water to a drowning man!"

"So you figured it out as well." Rohan said, a smirk on his face that made Fukawa want to slap it off so much. "Finally, the face of a main character."

Murray took a step back. "This energy coming from both of them," He said, barely able to get the words out. It seemed like the robot was totally intimidated by their cockiness. "It's as if they have unlocked their potential! 100% synch-rate!"

To be honest, Fukawa was surprised as well. She had spent so long having to drag out any sense of courage from Komaru that it was shocking to see the dummy bring it out on her own. Not only that, but she got Rohan pumped up about it as well. The smirk on both their faces, taking joy in sharing a
joke that no one else knew, was unnatural. As was that sheer sense of confidence from Komaru.

All this over a kid's riddle? It was then that Fukawa felt the shock leave her body and everything made sense. It's only natural that two total babies would be excited over a big kid riddle. Probably got something stupid lined up.

"Children don't think of psychological warfare, but they play games designed to trick you into the obvious answer." Komaru took a step forward and pointed a finger at Haiji. It happened with such speed and intensity that Fukawa was reminded of a certain older brother of Komaru's. "Haiji, if you wanted to keep hoodlums off your property, how would you do it?" She asked.

"I would order them to leave." Haiji replied, keeping his answer short and simple as leaders often had to.

Which was why Komaru had no place smirking like that! "If they refused? Whether you said you would call the police, or took up a weapon yourself, what would children do? Even from the point of hearing the threat itself?"

A mere moment passed before Haiji's eyes widened in shock. It was if he discovered an answer so obvious that the minutes of arguing it took to not even reach that point weren't just worthless, they were infuriating! Hagakure's own expression changed shortly after, even laughing at herself. The only one of the adults who hadn't gone through the same shock was Shinobu.

Makes sense that she'd not figure it out. Probably wouldn't even recognise her husband without a name-tag. Fukawa didn't need to figure out the answer. It was probably something stupid that only an idiot like Komaru would know, being on a similar wavelength. When did she figure it out though? Was she thinking about it while we were just arguing? Was she... waiting for the dramatic moment?

"Of course!" Murray shouted, clicking his fingers at the same time. "Miss Komaru, you are a genius! This child was making us think of the hunter, but not of the birds! A single shot couldn't kill all the birds, but-

"It'd frighten them off. Maybe some would be scared of the noise, but a child wouldn't think that far! That's where you went wrong, Hagakure. It's the certainty that they would flee at the death of one of their own. A single shot to get rid of all ten birds." Komaru leaned towards the child and put a hand on her waist and extended the other as a closed fist. "You're ten years too young to match I, the Riddle Queen, Komaru Naegi!"

We Built This City emerged behind her in the exact same dumb pose that she probably thought looked cool. Komaru would become a useless dependent when asked to do something, if given the choice, but when it came to kid's games she was all hyped up! What made it worse was that lousy mangaka.

The two were leaning against each other's backs and giving that same intense look to the child. As Komaru began to lean back, Rohan was on the attack. With a few flicks of the wrist, he summoned Heaven's Door and the Stand went flying towards the child's arm, making the limb open up into pages. Fukawa took one look at what he wrote down and restrained the urge to vomit in disgust.

'I lost in this game of wits.'

The kid started crying immediately. It might have been sad if it wasn't for the Murralsee helmet, and the fact that it had three traps planned for them. Murray didn't pay it any mind. In a single leap, he
rushed towards the pipe-line labelled C-the label for 'one shot' compared to A, B, and D—and was swallowed by darkness. From where the group stood, they could hear the sounds of Murray's landing.

Komaru and Rohan's smiles grew just that bit larger, as did Fukawa's annoyance with the two.

"Can't deny their energy." Hagakure said, putting a nice spin on their little show.

"All this time, I thought Hayato could be a brat," Shinobu said to herself, almost embarrassed for those two. As if she was any help to Haiji during this whole trip! "He's such an adult compared to them."

"I think everyone is an adult compared to this group." Haiji then turned his gaze to Fukawa, along with Hagakure and Shinobu. What was this? Did they think she was the same?

"Why are you looking at me?" Fukawa snapped. How could Haiji betray her like this? She was nothing like them. "I'm a sophisticated-

"Smut-writer." Rohan's words were followed by Shinobu looking to the ground with a red face. Of course someone like her, hitting on a man ten years younger just days after her husband died, would buy into the fantasies Fukawa offered.

She must have spent a long time in the bath with those books. The thought electrified Fukawa's spine as the image came to mind even as she restrained the urge to gag. Rohan had to be put in his place.

"At least I don't write character designs for hentai-artists." Fukawa smiled as that made Rohan get angry. Good. He was being too smug for his own good. "Go bond with Komaru over sloppy writing."

"It's not sloppy writing! Stories like The Bomb Inside Her-" Komaru seemed to sense Rohan's change in aura and shot around with a speed that Fukawa didn't know she had. All to defend her pile of trash. "No! I'll let you insult the popular shonen because you probably know better, but The Bomb Inside Her is art. Manga history."

Rohan leaned back and looked down on Komaru. "I wasn't going to say it's bad. Honestly, I'm relieved your long-term tastes are that tier. But it's got problems."

Komaru seemed to keep her glare strong because Rohan seemed to take that as a challenge. Haiji signalled to the others to begin moving towards the tunnel, enough time having been wasted, and Fukawa had never been so glad to hear that order. Anything to get away from the philistines and their arguing over which garbage was less garbage.

Besides, this was Komaru. How long could she really last in an argument with Rohan Kishibe?
Yoshikage Kira did not have the past he wished for.

He was a man forced to kill because of something that he could not change. He was a man forced to flee his home after one shitbag cop got too fussy about his sandwich. He was a man forced into handcuffs because of some deadbeat with something to prove to a now-dead man. He was a man who literally had his face and clothes ripped from him and attached to another.

He saw his own face turn deathly white and die in front of him. Kira could feel his nails growing as the urge to act on his desires grew, but also unable to do so. Trapped in an identity that only attracted attention to a man who wanted to live a normal life. All while, up above, some brats turned the surface into a killing spree from which there seemed no escape.

It took his entire willpower to restrain himself. To see the hands of those like Shinobu Kawajiri and Hiroko Hagakure and keep himself from using Killer Queen. To play along with Murray's little fantasy and keep himself from interrogating the overgrown calculator. Did he know who he truly was? He had to, but did Murray know what that meant? All things that were controlled by his will.

A will that Komaru Naegi and Rohan Kishibe were testing.

"-it was a perfectly decent one-shot that had a weak sequel. The first half just romanticised a dark ending." Rohan said, talking about this 'Bomb Inside Her'. Kira's entire method involved the use of Killer Queen and even he was tired of hearing about women exploding.

"He was only bullying her to express emotion without killing her. Any other way and she'd die." Komaru insisted. She spoke with a passion he had only seen with those riddles before. Was this truly the sister of the Ultimate Hope?

"Yes. A tragedy. Not a romance." Rohan narrowed his eyes. "You know how the second volume was meant to end right?"

"No! That'd have been super-sad!" Komaru insisted. Kira disagreed; if it meant ending the damn thing.

"Just because something's sad doesn't mean it's bad. Better your heart is broken and you keep that feeling than simply getting drip by drip. She's a mangaka that could be the best of all time but keeps preferring to play it safe, to the editor's delight. Each volume just kept adding new characters to pad out the plot while the author tried to create a long-term narrative. It's why she went on that ridiculous-" Rohan paused. It seemed like his mind finally thought about something other than manga. "I suppose all those hiatuses were justified."

"So the end of the world brought about the end of that manga. Guess something good came out of it." Fukawa mumbled to herself. Rohan and Komaru stopped arguing to turn towards Fukawa, apparently giving a look off-putting enough that she resembled a ghoul. "Ah!"

That threw Hiroko off. The Stand user had otherwise been happily half-listening to their conversation, unlike Kira, Shinobu, and Fukawa who were stuck with it for half-an-hour, but now she had been taken off-guard. A rare moment. Murray, who seemed almost enraptured, recoiled and rushed to Fukawa's side.

"Miss Fukawa! You look as if a powerful force just struck you! Meteors striking through satellites themselves!" He cried out.
"You're damn right. The power of two nerds who don't know how to read like grown-ups." Fukawa was speaking for the group, as they then marched on.

Kira kept himself calm and collected, as the ideal leader was meant to be, even as Komaru and Rohan started their ridiculous argument again. It fell to those like Fukawa to loudly groan and Shinobu to mutter about immaturity in teenagers and adults nowadays.

"Is Hayato into manga?" Kira asked. If he was too stoic, it'd look like he was being distant. Small talk humanised leaders.

"Not particularly. He reads Shonen Jump, but he's not...like them" Shinobu replied, sounding almost happy about her own answer.

Good. He's worth all the shit all the people back at the base are giving me about these missions. The chatter was beginning to get to Kira. For all of Komaru's talk about being normal in every way, a fact he refused to be jealous of, she was being very abnormal in her rigid defence of some manga. They were approaching this with enough passion to irritate him. Idiots! The world around you is dead. At least the girl was a captive; but you Rohan Kishibe? What kind of idiot misses the apocalypse?

"Well, we're here." Hiroko said, pointing to the giant iron door up ahead.

Getting the entrance open was no issue even without Stands with Murray's strength. The machine had said that he built this base in a matter of hours, which Kira did believe from how ramshackle some of it looked, but it had been good enough for their needs. It housed the few hundred survivors that remained and was well-protected enough that they could hide until the right moment.

The right moment to either wait for the Future Foundation to solve this problem or evacuate this godforsaken city.

As the group entered the city, dozens of downcast figures looked on them and their despair lightened. Only slightly. The loss of their loves ones, their injuries, and being stuck underground for so long had sapped their spirits. The closest thing to a celebration was their eyes lightening up slightly and some people noting their appearance.

It was pathetic.

"Everyone, they're back." Someone murmured, pointing to both Kira and Murray. "Murray and Haiji. They're back."

About a dozen people moved towards them and began to crowd Kira. It was the same set of questions they asked after every rescue mission. Did you save anyone else? Who died? Do you have to make these runs? When can we go back up? Why risk yourself on these missions? How the hell are we meant to feed you useless grunts otherwise? How do we escape? Replies like those would satisfy him but destroy morale. So Kira played the role of Haiji Towa, the heir who had to shape up for the role he was in, offering slightly uneasy but firm explanations.

The fact that he brought three Stand users with him helped matters. It'd be fine for boosting confidence among these people, so long as they didn't actually talk to any of the three-

"Rohan? Rohan, you're alive." A slightly overweight, glasses-wearing, man with barely enough hair to cover the top of his head moved towards the three. Just Kira's luck that this manga editor would
emerge. "It's so good to see-oh no you're upset."

Kira turned and saw that Rohan was indeed looking upset. Well, more upset than usual. If he truly didn't know about The Tragedy from the start, even if he stayed in his room, then it meant that no one had told him for all those months. The editor knew what Rohan was like and said nothing.

Komaru moved between Rohan and the editor and gave Kira a look of apology.

"S-Sorry, Haiji, but we'll introduce ourselves later." She said, turning to Rohan and taking his left arm while We Built This City took his right. "Rohan-sensei! Don't kill your editor."

"Do it. Then we can lock him up and he'll be out of our lives." Fukawa looked at Kira and waved with a feline-like smile on her face. "We'll see each other again." She promised, as Kira was already walking ahead with Murray and Shinobu on each side.

"That girl has a rotten soul." Shinobu said. Kira wondered if she was upset about Fukawa's intentions, her words, or the fact that she had Fukawa's books in her room.

"But she's not wrong about him." Kira looked back at Rohan, thinking that he wouldn't see him, and gave a glance to the woman behind him. "Hiroko, keep an eye on them. Especially..." He had to think about this. Komaru was safe, but a pushover, while Rohan and Fukawa were more the wild-cards. Rohan had Heaven's Door and Fukawa the Genocider.

He couldn't decide who needed the most watching.

"Yeah, they're gonna a tough crew. But keep an open mind on them." Hiroko's eyes softened as she looked at the group; Komaru and We Built This City doing their best to hold a screaming Rohan back. "We've all been through a lot. They've probably haven't been able to let off steam for a while. Someone needs to tell her about the bracelets."

As the sounds of screaming echoed throughout the camp, Murray restraining the urge to go back to them, Kira and Shinobu moved forward along with the machine. They couldn't distract themselves with disputes between every single survivor. Micro-managers were resented and sources of suspicion.

"You said I was rank five! I thought I was finally moving up again! You didn't say how many were left!" Rohan's screams were becoming more distant. Something that Kira was thankful for.

"We had to! You might have left and then we'd have no former established artists left. We were going to tell you after Bloody Games was finished." The editor's tone changed from pleading to what could only be described as haggling. "If anything, it sold well considering the subject manner and your...creative choices. Look, readers don't like dark stories anymore. Maybe if you brought back Joten, like those letters ask-oh my pleases, no!"

"Rohan-sensei, no!" Komaru screamed as Rohan seemed to be on the attack again.

Kira sighed and took a moment to breathe in and out. Anything to get his mind off the fact that his nails were beginning to grow again. He'd need to keep a level head when going to the council, more a collection of adults willing to discuss strategy before being told what would happen, and this wasn't helping.

Up ahead was one of the council members now. Kira would say he'd been a sceptic of his and
Murray's plan, but that'd describe all the council members, to be honest.

"The others are waiting for you to discuss this plan of yours," The man's face turned to one of disgust; Kira could already predict his next words. "We brought them with us."

They had been found just yesterday. Technically, 'found' wasn't the right term. The brothers had wanted to meet with the rescue team and had arranged themselves so that meeting them was inevitable. They had managed to predict Murray's route and greeted the machine with a plea for help.

The fact that they were Stand users, especially when he learnt their abilities, was why Kira let them in. For the others, however, they had compensated their own weakness by focusing their hatred less on solutions and more on children. They were so deluded that they thought the children did this of their own free will.

It didn't help that the giant monitor kept showing them images of their friends and family being tortured. Kira had tried to have it destroyed, but he wondered if that'd even stop anything. Murray claimed it was there when he arrived, but Kira doubted it. Regardless, the survivors would have fought to keep the monitor, for just the slightest hope that their loved ones were safe.

They never were.

So when Kira introduced Zenyatta and Mondatta, also known as 'Oingo' and 'Boingo' to one another, it hadn't been a popular decision.

It didn't help that Shinobu and Hiroko were the only parents among them. The rest of them had been childless adults who had seen their families be torn apart to the sound of laughing children and Murralsee growls. What little logic they had left was gone when it came to children.

Murray, just what is it that you want from us? Kira asked himself, but keeping a calm front to the man. "We agreed that any Stand user was a useful asset. Murray found them being chased by the Murralsee. If you doubt his judgement, say it now."

He wouldn't. Everyone here had been saved by Murray. To doubt him would be to doubt the hand of God itself.

That silenced the council member who simply opened the door for Kira, Shinobu, and Murray, as the four of them walked into the meeting room where everyone was sat around the table. Zenyatta and Mondatta were sat by the corner of the room instead. Both sides seemed happy with that arrangement.

Kira himself didn't know who he was more interested in. The user of Khnum could change his very appearance; a superior version of Haiji's own Stand in that it changed everything and didn't require swapping with another. But Toth's user could see into the future itself. Not perfectly, but enough predictions that it had made many missions that much easier.

It had been how the Egyptian brothers had survived for so long. Mondatta's Toth predicted The Tragedy and that Towa City was safe, so they moved there, and then learnt of the Warriors of Hope so he avoided the Murralsee helmet. Just as Hayato supposedly did. Such foresight was necessary in any resistance.

Not to mention that it validated Kira's own plan to end this crisis.
"I don't like this." One of the council members, supposedly a former police officer, said. His arms were folded and he was rocking back and forth in his chair. "We can't just sit here and wait for help to come to us. We've got to get out of here and do something!"

"Those Murralsee outnumber us! They'll kill us all." One of the women argued.

"So we just wait here and die?" He asked, slamming his left fist against the table.

"Or go out there and die?" She asked back, doing the same but with the palms of both hands.

"We are not going to die." Kira said. To the council, this was Haiji Towa making a dramatic appearance. "If we stay here, supplies will run out and people will panic. If we simply just leave, without a plan, we'll be lambs in the slaughterhouse. What we need is time and bodies. Time we can buy with supply raids and rationing. Bodies are another matter. We need someone to either fight this war for us, or get us out of here."

He looked to Zenyatta who stood up from where he sat. His younger brother hid behind his leg and barely reacted to the glares coming his way. "Boingo's Stand can see into the future with manga." Zenyatta held out his hand and Mondatta gave his manga. "Check this out."

Zenyatta held out the open pages of the manga which revealed a grotesque comic depicting a group of people climbing up Towa Tower and speaking into a laptop to someone. But not just anyone. Even in its mocked form, no one could deny that they were looking at the symbol of the Future Foundation.

Not that they seemed to realise the lack of alternatives.

"The Future Foundation? They're meant to help us?" An older, more cynical, but no more intelligent, member of the council asked. "They couldn't even catch the Remnants of Despair after Dio got killed. Y'know what? How do we even know that they're not just working with the Remnants? This could all be one sick game to them."

"Because then there is no Hope." Kira tried to keep the anger from his voice. Leaders had to be blunt but not angry at these times. "A small group of Stand users could survive this hell for as long as they need. But we're not that group. We are the last survivors of Towa City. We are the last fragments of hope for everyone who had died or come here for sanctuary. Towa Tower is not our best chance. It's the only chance."

Once they had the Future Foundation, the battle to survive would be over. The Remnants of Despair were just that. Remnants. The Future Foundation had the infrastructure and logistics to arrange an actual evacuation and could offer escape routes and ships for the adults. They could discuss a plan to migrate from this giant prison cell.

Haiji Towa could even disappear into the crowd and be reported as lost. The chaos of battle between the Future Foundation and the Murralsee could hide anyone who wanted to be hidden.

The worst-case scenario was someone like the Ultimate Detective and she would be busy on the frontlines.

"Haiji is right." Murray said. Just as Kira knew he would. "I wish I could protect you all. I wish I could reach the hearts of these children and make them stop all this madness." The machine gripped its fists until scraping metal screeched across the room. He sighed and let go. "But I can't. I grow
weaker every day. I cannot abandon you and yet it will kill me. If the Future Foundation can at least try to help us, then maybe something will happen. Maybe we can finally find the courage to stand up and reclaim our fates."

"Come on, it's too risky." Another council member lamented. This one was almost Haiji's age, before Kira had to kill him and take his identity. "If you or Haiji vanished, we wouldn't last a day."

This was what it all boiled down to. Why they didn't like the rescue missions, or him agreeing to help find Hayato. The council, and even every last survivor in this camp, realised that it was safe to let their spirits break and just rely on him. If Haiji went away then there was no one strong enough to guide them.

It was worthy of mockery.

The doors slammed open. Kira turned and expected news of some disaster or of the Murraalsee encroaching on the base. What he found was the trio of newcomers all being held down by arms of solid smoke as the cloud wafted in, led by Hiroko who was shrugging her shoulders, over the sounds of their arguing. Zenyatta was already moving to keep his little brother from the smoke.

"Sorry, sorry," Hiroko said, without sounding like she meant it, as the entire council and Shinobu herself glared at her. "Kids got a bit scrappy. Decided it was time-out time."

It was actually fortuitous timing for Kira. Before him were the three people who he could trust for this mission into Towa Tower. All of their Stands were effective for this mission. Rohan's Stand would let him control the children commanding the Murraalsee, Fukawa's Stand could tear through their numbers, even without the Genocider, and Komaru's shield was unbreakable.

Not only that, but Komaru had another use to Kira. Both brothers had agreed to keep it quiet about the identity of the one who'd be hearing the cry for help. A small favour for their protector to hide a name and face.

Even when it was the name and face of the Ultimate Hope.

Makoto Naegi. You will send thousands to their deaths if it means saving us. Kira looked at Komaru, who had been let go from Smoke On The Water's grip, as she tried to speak with Fukawa and Rohan. The resemblance to the Future Foundation's mascot was clear. Because you'll know what will happen if you don't. The second you see her face, you'll be nothing more than a slave awaiting commands.

Yoshikage Kira did not have the past he wished for; but he would reclaim his future. Just as he did with that cop and the real Haiji Towa in the offices, and just as he did with Ishimaru in the subway station. Yes, there had been a witness, but he too was silenced by Killer Queen. Kira would be able to live a normal life again, away from attention and suspicion, soon enough.

All he needed was the war that would cloud everything else.
"You believe in ghosts too?" Komaru was shocked but happy at the same time. Someone did believe in her ability!

Fukawa had just written her off as an idiot, and Haiji was doing that thing teachers did when they didn't say you were dumb but thought it, but she never expected Rohan to believe her. He wasn't entirely mean! Komaru really did have supernatural abilities, but it was nice to hear that someone thought the same too.

"Of course I would. We live in a world of Stands and people with abnormal Talents. Why shouldn't there be such things as ghosts? Especially when seen with my own eyes." Rohan said, making Komaru's heart strengthen, only to then weaken when he glared at Fukawa. "Only a poorly-written sceptic character would be 100% in doubt."

"Big talk coming from you. What? Is your manga just a story about imaginary friends?" Fukawa hissed back. Why did Komaru's friends have to fight? Now Fukawa was glaring at her. "Stands and Talents come from science, Omaru. Only kids and shut-ins believe in ghosts. Maybe you can marry this guy and you can both have children with terrible taste."

"But he's double my age!" Komaru didn't want to marry Rohan. She wanted to marry someone her age who wasn't just on the rebound!

"Guess it's the pachinko halls for you then." Fukawa's words were searing into Komaru's mind. Was that to be her fate? "Though maybe Mister Manga there's into that kind of age difference. Gotta keep the otakus.-"

"I think we're losing sight of the topic at hand here." Haiji interrupted Fukawa in the nick of time. Komaru didn't like how Rohan was glaring at Fukawa at that last line. The last thing they needed was a fight like they had in the base. "We're in a graveyard and we want to be at the Towa Group building. Let's get moving."

The city had changed so much. The grey ruins had been replaced with bright colours, only the graveyard itself now looked even spookier than before. The dark blue and blood-red made it look like there had been a massacre, which the hanging nooses and skulls did nothing to help with, and the way these colours were just splashed about. As if someone had lots of paint buckets and went to town.

Not to mention that this is a graveyard. Komaru had to keep herself from shivering even now. Why was she stuck with this school uniform in this time of day? It was bad enough that she was here with braver people who could see her shiver with fear. Fukawa, Rohan, and Haiji were all better equipped for this. Hagakure's Stand was even better for this kind of thing.

We Built This City was cool to Komaru, but all it did was protect a single person, while everyone else suffered.

Fukawa's words came back to her. The moment she had heard of the Resistance's plan to either hide out or run, she lost any crush she had on Haiji. Or maybe she was always loyal to Togami and only remembered it then. Komaru didn't know. But what she did know was that Fukawa thought that this whole thing was cowardice.

But what was the point in fighting if they'd just die? Haiji was right. Even with their Stands, they couldn't defeat all those Murralsee. Why shouldn't they call for help from people who could actually
fight? It was better than Fukawa's plan of just fighting, and better than Rohan's scheme of simply going to where he put his Arrow and then fighting the Warriors of Hope.

Zenyatta and Mondatta—the two brothers who were helping Hagakure with finding the other Hunted—were right. The last thing the adults needed was a reason to get more upset with everything. These small little pushes were better. If only Fukawa could see that.

Komaru needed something to cheer herself up. All this self-introspection about what she couldn't do was getting her down.

What did Rohan say about seeing ghosts?

"When did you see a ghost, Rohan-sensei?" Komaru popped the question as they began to walk away from the entrance. The sounds of metallic steps clanging on the ground echoed throughout the air. She readied her Hacking Gun. "Were you a kid back then?"

"I was twenty. It was the ghost of my old babysitter. Reimi Sugimoto." Rohan looked over at Haiji as he spoke. It was almost like he was scanning the man for a reaction, which Haiji wasn't giving. It made sense to Komaru; Haiji was probably around the same age as Rohan when he saw the ghost. "She died to a serial killer. I wouldn't be here if she hadn't saved me."

Komaru wanted to put a hand on his back in sympathy when Fukawa opened her mouth.

"Probably honoured her by making her a bimbo."

That got Rohan upset. He seemed ready to turn and make Fukawa do something horrible with Heaven's Door, and Fukawa had already shut her eyes and pulled out the taser to summon Syo and defend herself. The metallic marching drew closer and Komaru stepped in between the two. Poor Haiji looked ready to explode until she moved in.

"Fukawa, that's mean. You should be nice to people who share these details. And you don't have to use your Stand on everyone who isn't nice to you, Rohan-sensei." Komaru tried to mimic her mother whenever she and Makoto fought. It seemed to work, judging by how Fukawa and Rohan were crossing their arms and grumbling to themselves, just like she and Makoto would.

"I'm starting to wonder if I should have brought you all along. If we spent as much time bickering as we did on the objective, we'd have liberated the whole city by now." Haiji didn't even look at them. A Murralsee, this one caked in yellow and black stripes and an air-raid siren on its head, marched just ahead of them.

It didn't see them yet, but it still made her feel bad. Haiji picked up a nearby rock, used Killer Queen on it, and threw the stone towards the Murralsee. It just narrowly tapped against the side of its head when Killer Queen pressed its thumb down and the pebble became an explosion. A high-pitched wail died down, as if it never even happened.

Just another example of how everyone but Komaru had something to contribute. Everyone was counting on them and she was helping to attract attention when they should be moving. Where would they even be without Haiji?

What should I expect? I'm just a normal girl with three amazing people, just trying to get to her family again. Komaru felt a flash of inspiration crash against her skull. That was it!
"I'm Dorothy!" She said, loudly whispering to avoid the Murralsee's attention.

Everyone stared at her before Haiji gave a slight wave. "And I'm Haiji Towa. It's nice to meet you."

"No, I mean I'm Dorothy from Wizard of Oz." Komaru pointed to herself and then to the others. "I'm a normal girl in a strange world, being helped to find a way home by three special people looking for something they want, and we're a foursome."

"So are you the dog too?" Rohan asked, making her blush. She didn't mean it entirely to be like the movie.

"Shouldn't I be Dorothy? I mean, you all fit the criteria for the others," Fukawa asked, pointing at Komaru. "Brainless," Not even a whine came out before she pointed to Rohan next. "Heartless," Rohan barely had time to glare before she pointed to Haiji, who just gave her a look of apathetic contempt. "Spineless."

"Fukawa!" Komaru cried out, before realising what she just did.

"Let's get moving." Haiji's voice was firm and brooked no argument. They had a long way to go and they couldn't just spend their time arguing with each other. Especially not with the Murralsee about.

It was about half an hour of moving around and doing what they normally did. Finding left behinds scraps of papers and items that were left behind in the chaos and discussing them in quiet. Haiji wanted them to get a move on but it was near-impossible to stop Fukawa and Rohan from talking when they really wanted to. They saw survivors in complete denial or despair on what was happening and Murralsee-helmeted children playing around.

The Murralsee weren't too hard when fighting a group of Stand users, especially when one had a Hacking Gun, even if they came in droves. Komaru's aim was at least improving in that one in every three to five shots was hitting them in those tiny eye-slits. Whenever Fukawa became Syo, she could turn dozens of Murralsee—even those with the riots shields—into nothing more than a pile of scrap and bolts.

Rohan provided moral support. Whenever Fukawa's taser ran out of energy, he used his Heaven's Door, even if reluctantly, to improve Fukawa's throwing ability enough that the scissor blades at least touched the Murralsee. With all the hate she had for those machines, it was more than enough to immobilise them. Haiji himself was a machine himself.

*It's like a fireworks display.* The way that the machines were destroyed by the destruction of even a pebble. Not that it was entirely an explosion. There was a burst of fire and light before the explosion would then implode into itself. It meant that less Murralsee were taken out, but it also kept the rest of them safe.

Maybe that was why Rohan was looking at Haiji with such intensity sometimes. Maybe something for his manga?

It was about half an hour of travelling and fighting, Towa Tower just in the distance, when they came across another pile of bodies. No matter how many times she saw these kind of things, Komaru could never get used to them. Her eyes began to water and her voice quivered when Haiji spoke up again.

"So what was your supernatural experience like?" He asked.
Komaru's expression brightened as she remembered the story. Sometimes she felt it was spooky more than anything, but other times she felt grateful that there was a spirit vengeful enough about leaving the class without saying goodbye that she was visited by it. The others would probably find it strange, but it'd help pass the time, as long as they didn't laugh.

Compared to learning that the guy whose poster she practised kissing on destroyed the world; the worst was behind her on embarrassing stories. How bad could it be?

"Well, it was the third grade and we were doing an overnight sleepover at the school. I was sleeping when I was woken up by a strange noise coming from above..."

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"We can still turn back, y'know?" Fukawa mumbled. She shuffled back from where the blood was pooling towards her shoes. "It's okay to be scared, Omaru."

Rohan couldn't stop himself from being suspicious of her. There were only two people in the building that he wasn't suspicious of and those were Komaru Naegi and Hayato Kawajiri, and the latter was supposedly hiding out in the top floor, leaving him with Touko Fukawa and 'Haiji Towa'. Well, not just them. There was also Taichi Fujisaki.

He and Hayato had apparently been working together. Hayato hid out in Towa Tower after being separated from his parents and roamed the streets, safe owing to his age but fearful of the helmets, while Taichi had experience working in this place. Their best connection were walkie-talkies whose signals were enhanced by Taichi's Hotline Bling.

Rohan should have seen this coming. The helpful new person who also couldn't fight, talking about having hope of escaping, and even mentioned his damn family. How could Rohan have not seen this ambush coming! It was as cliche as it ever could have been that some new Murrasee-this one more canine in appearance and style-would have taken a bite out of his neck.

It managed to get a claw or two on Rohan himself. It was only because of Komaru that his stomach wasn't entirely opened-up. For someone who couldn't really do anything to these machines, Rohan had been too close. There was nothing he could do for people like Taichi and Komaru.

No. That wasn't entirely true. Rohan Kishibe could keep an eye on people like Fukawa who had been insisting that they turn back ever since they first arrived to this building. How long had she been complaining about Komaru being unwilling to fight? Now she was telling Komaru that they should simply turn back and abandon Towa Tower. Abandon their best chance of getting help.

What are you doing? Why don't you want us to leave? Rohan wondered if 'Haiji' knew something about this. Maybe he and Fukawa made some kind of deal. Fukawa's abandoning of her stalker-act was just a red herring and the two serial killers were working together. Genocider Syo and Yoshikage Kira. What the hell are you hiding? You have to be him. There's no other way you could have Killer Queen otherwise.
It had to be the case. He refused to say whether he had been hit by the Arrow. Rohan was detecting a pattern with people like himself and the Oingo Boingo siblings. What if Stand users from his world who made it to this one didn't need a Stand Arrow for their Stands? It'd be proof that Kira somehow made it here and stole Haiji's identity as he did Kosaku Kawajiri's.

But he had to be sure. That was why Rohan settled for just keeping an eye on Kira and another on Komaru.

He had to keep Komaru and Hayato safe at all costs. Komaru was too trusting of Fukawa and that was blinding her to the cliche betrayal that might be coming. With Hayato, Rohan had an actual connection with the old world and Morioh. He couldn't lose that as well.

There had to be something of his old life left.

Until then, he contented himself with seeing Komaru keep her cool and stand tall. Even when the tears pooled under her eyes, she wasn't giving up. "No. Taichi died for this. Everyone in the base is counting on us. Those kids want us to cry about this and run away." Komaru made a long sniff and the tears were rubbed out of her eyes. She titled her head upwards and glared. "We have to contact the Future Foundation. They'll come and save us. They'll put an end to this."

"You're right, Komaru. If we left now, we'd be spitting on Taichi's corpse. Not to mention we'd be leaving Hayato to die up there." Rohan kept back a smile. There was the fire he wanted to see from her. That will to fight and spit in the face of the odds. It reminded him of Koichi. "This is our best chance."

"It's our only chance," 'Haiji' said. His wrists were firmly shut and the nails likely digging into the skin itself. Rohan tried to see if they were bleeding. "We've only got a week's worth of supplies left and that's without an attack. If we get forced above-ground..."

They'd be dead. Everyone was either injured or had mentally broken down from what had happened above-surface. They were husks without the will to fight, with a bare few exceptions, fuelled only by a hatred and fear they could barely express. If they had some hope, maybe they'd find the will to fight again.

So why was Fukawa doubting this mission so much? What did she want to hide from them? Or was she even on the Future Foundation's side?

Rohan kept drawing and writing. Drawing and writing. He had to make the next deadline. Why the hell did he have to be in the office today? Morioh was best for his artistic influences, but the Shonen Jump offices demanded that he come in and work there. Something about meeting a new mangaka or whatever.

He just had to finish this next chapter and then he could move and actually get work done.

But he was ahead of chapters. That was why they wanted him to meet the new mangaka. Because he wasn't busy. Only he had to have been busy and couldn't have been ahead. If he didn't finish this chapter quick, he'd miss the deadline. It had already been a few days since he just started and it felt like a few minutes.

No time to think. No time to answer the phone. No time to pay attention to anything. He had to keep working. Keep drawing his manga. Once people read this chapter, their minds would be completely
That's why he kept on writing. Even when the lights seemed to change every second. Even when he felt like he couldn't breathe anymore. Even when it felt like the entire world and universe around him was getting faster and faster.

Just finish the next chapter.

Rohan ignored the memory; the last thing he had of the old world before it was lost to him. He couldn't focus on that now. He needed to keep his focus on the present; more importantly, on Komaru Naegi. He had missed the end of his world and the near-end of this world. He wouldn't be distracted now.

Komaru needed someone to watch her back. She was naive, dense, self-criticising to an annoying extent, had terrible to mediocre taste in manga, and had no idea how to handle the trials ahead of her alone. Maybe Rohan was being paranoid about Fukawa and 'Haiji', but maybe he wasn't. Maybe Komaru was being set-up for something and Rohan was the only one who noticed.

He was going to be finished soon, he couldn't deny that.

But he wasn't finished yet.

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"I hate you, Omaru!" Fukawa was spitting out every word. There was a putrid loathing that broke through Komaru's defences. "Just looking at that hideous face, filled with indecision and a refusal to grow, makes me want to vomit. Just a normal girl with nothing special about her? You're no better than those walking corpses below! No. You're even worse."

Komaru was already crying. This wasn't how thing were meant to be! They weren't supposed to all be screaming at each other.

But here they were. Rohan, Fukawa, and Haiji, along with Heaven's Door and Killer Queen, were all stuck in blobs of glue that Jataro's Judas Priest had spat at them. They had first tried to bring the fight to the evil little child, but their numbers and confidence had hurt them. They weren't able to coordinate and just got in each other's way.

We Built This City managed to protect Komaru from the giant white spit of Judas Priest, a collection of tied-together brown leather rags that formed a giant dopey-smiled creature that almost looked human, if that even was its spit. It might have been its blood. Or vomit.

The disgusting Stand couldn't do anything against We Built This City's shielding. The smooth metallic surface even made the glue slide right off. The only thing it couldn't keep out-without closing off Komaru's air supply-was the smell. It stunk so much.

It reminded her of all those art projects when she was a kid and the teachers brought out those pots of
glue. The ones that stuck to the ends of your sleeves, dried into an ugly colour on your skin, and smelled terrible. A monster like Jataro probably liked it.

Liked it just as much as he did turning those people into mannequins for his diorama.

He was just standing there now, laughing at them. Killer Queen's entire left arm was submerged in the glue as was Haiji's right leg. It was the same kind of situation with Rohan and Fukawa. Komaru couldn't even help them since We Built This City wasn't strong enough to pull them out of the glue.

She had started to apologise when Fukawa exploded on her. Once again, Komaru's attempt at making amends was met with being spat on the face by an ungrateful friend.

Why was Fukawa being like this? Komaru was always nice to Fukawa and she got bullied in turn. For what? For not being strong and just rolling up her sleeves whenever the going got tough? How was it her fault that she couldn't do anything?

Komaru tried to force the bubbling anger down.

"Look who's talking!" Rohan barked from Komaru's right, trying to wrench his right leg from the glue. He distorted his facial expression and his voice became higher, a cruel but deserved mockery of Fukawa's. "Master, Haiji, oh will someone please make me feel worthwhile. You mock manga but you act like every goddamn female character today. A ball of personality traits designed to appeal to someone expecting to read a dating sim! No sense of self-worth beyond tearing others down. No experience of actual love! You're not even a side-character. You're a joke character that's been around for too long."

"Joke? Joke? I'll tell you who's a joke." Fukawa hissed. She stopped trying to drag her right elbow to get the taser close enough to the side of her head. Look who was giving up now? Instead, she started to lower her voice. "I missed the end of my world because of manga. I missed the end of this world because of manga. Please. You're just a chunnibyou who woke up, realised he's in his thirties, and made up some fantasy world to explain why he's still writing kid's manga. Wait, you don't write kid's manga anymore. You had to switch to edgy teens after even kids got better taste."

That got Rohan upset. Why couldn't Fukawa just learn to keep her mouth shut?

But Rohan went too far, as always. Jataro was too far away for him to use Heaven's Door, but there was nothing stopping him from using it on Fukawa. Apart from a sense of morality, only that'd be too low-brow for the great and powerful Rohan Kishibe. No. He had to have the last word.

Even when those last words were 'I will stab myself in the gut with scissors'.

Fukawa's free hand went straight into the glue and wrenched out a pair of scissors. Komaru couldn't even react before the blades were plunged deep into Fukawa's gut. The blood couldn't even seep out before the scar expanded across her entire chest.

It reminded Komaru of those old sprinklers that sometimes had slow short bursts before the long spray. Fukawa's body skipped the short bursts and went for the long splash. The blood poured over the glue as Komaru barely dodged it in time.

The anger briefly left Komaru when she saw Fukawa getting pale. Why didn't she do anything to stop him?
Yeah. Stop Rohan. He did this. The fury returned to Komaru as she turned to Rohan with a glare. This was typical him! A slight insult had him almost kill someone else! Why did she ever think he was worthy of admiration. He's no better than Jataro. Killing and torturing just because he wants to.

Komaru would have said something if Haiji, from behind the group, didn't interrupt her.

"Idiots! Every last one of you!" He shouted, still trying to wrench his leg from the leg, using enough force that Komaru thought he'd rip it off. "Fight the kid, not each other! I brought you all here to be of fucking use! To actually be worthwhile! Why did I expect any better from trash?" Komaru bit back a response from the ingrate. How dare he. As if he would have gotten anywhere without them. "Learn from my example. See what you want done, and do it."

A gaggle of chuckles that became a child's attempt at a deep laugh sank through the air and into Komaru's ears. She turned her head to see Jataro giggling into his too-long sleeves as if this was all funny to him. A growl came from her, one that found a tune alongside the others. Not even his audience liked him.

Why would they? A Stand so hideous that it was wrapped in the same leathery scabs as Jataro's mask combined with a monster so poisonous that he thought a macabre display of corpses, put in place by strings and bolts through skin and bone, rising to cardboard clouds was fun. All to get a rise out of Komaru, Fukawa, and Rohan when they were in the subway.

He wasn't even a child anymore. He was nothing more than a demon. A little monster that had to be taken down.

Komaru couldn't even stand the scent of him. Or maybe it was the glue, but either way a black putrid essence bubbled within her.

"See? You're all showing your hatred. Doesn't it feel nice to stop trying to be liked?" Jataro asked, sounding so pleased with himself. Komaru cursed the fact that his mother didn't beat him hard enough to kill him. "Monaca's going to be so upset when I win the Game and bring her four heads."

Shut up you little shit. Komaru thought to herself. It was now up to her, once again as the only one with the Hacking Gun, to solve this problem.

As she took a step forward, though, that was when she heard Rohan scoff at her.

"So now you feel like taking the offensive?" He asked, Komaru turning to see the half-submerged mangaka glaring at her. "You know the worst part about you, Komaru? You could have been a great person. You could have been a main character. But no. You simply just lean on others and make them work for you. Work you could do on your own!" He wasn't even trying to look cool; he was just furious. "There's nothing worse than a person who could be a shooting star, only to decide moving's too much effort."

Komaru might have cried before. Someone she admired tearing into her like that might have broken her heart. But not now. She took a breath, even if the air was thick with that glue's scent, and let Rohan know how it felt to be yelled at.

"This is why..." A small part of her was screaming to stop, before she spoke too soon for it to make a difference. "This is why no one reads your manga anymore!" That same part of her mewled when the hate in Rohan's eyes was replaced by hurt. But she wasn't going to stop now. When did he stop when insulting people and what they loved? "The art is beautiful. The plots are interesting and fun.
The characters are great. But no one cares, Rohan. Do you know why? It's because we're not stupid, or not stupid enough to know what you think. Yeah, we want characters to survive what they shouldn't. We want to know that everything's going to be alright by Act 2. We want a happy ending that doesn't make us cry!

But we don't want to read stories by people like you. People who have no friends and act like that's a good thing! People who make-up worlds about themselves and then spit on others for not being a part of you. People who change their stories into dark and bitter tales about people they don't like and act like they're being deep when it's just being mean! We see what's inside your stories and it's you. A mean, childish, bitter old man who hates everything and everyone and acts like he's smart because of it.

We don't read Pink Dark Boy because we don't want to read Rohan Kishibe's stories anymore!

Rohan didn't say anything. Just like all bullies, he couldn't do anything when the tables were turned. He just sat there in the pile of glue and stared at her, as if processing the fact that someone finally stood up to him. Komaru was being brave, wasn't she? Isn't this what they all wanted from her? She shouldn't have to feel bad! This was all Rohan's fault anyway!

"Look who finally grew a spine." A low and mocking voice said. She didn't have to turn to know who said that.

That was Komaru's last straw. When she turned, it was to slam her shoe against Fukawa's jaw, the bully's arms either stuck in the glue or keeping the scissors lodged in her flesh, and felt a sense of victory when she felt a crack. Good. It was Fukawa's turn to learn a lesson.

"Apologise." Komaru's growl didn't get a response. Fine. She leaned and grabbed the dazed Fukawa's hair by the roots and pulled on it. "Apologise! Say you're sorry for being mean. Say you're sorry for insulting me. Say you're sorry for insulting everyone. Beg! Beg forgiveness for acting high and mighty because you can fight. Hell, beg forgiveness for smelling like what you are. A piece of shit!"

Fukawa spat right in her face like the disgusting pig she was. "Fuck you, Omaru." Fukawa even had the audacity to smirk. "Heh, guess that name really does fit you."

That was it. Komaru was trying to be nice and give Fukawa a chance to apologise, but it was going to have to be the hard way. Maybe this would do the job. We Built This City emerged behind her and readied its fists, power flowing through it, letting out a warm hum that got inside her and filled her with a new energy. It was strange. Komaru had never tried to do this before.

Now she was going to actually use We Built This City to attack. Not only that, but to attack Fukawa, who was busy bleeding from the scar going diagonally across from her left gut up to her right shoulder. It was looking deep as well. If she didn't get medical attention soon-

Wait. Komaru was confused. Didn't she hate Fukawa? No. How could she hate Fukawa; the girl who had helped her so much and hadn't abandoned her? But then she did she kick her and say all those mean things? Why did she treat Rohan like that as well? Why was she doing all this while Jataro was up there and Haiji was still stuck in the glue? What did I do? How could I have said all those mean things?

Komaru wanted to cry and apologise and say she didn't know what came over her. But then she saw
Jataro. She saw him standing there and grinning just as he did when showing her that horrifying diorama. The anger inside was boiling again. She was going to teach that little shit a lesson! Not least for filling the air with-

*His Stand. That's what's making us fight. He's making us hate each other.* Judas Priest didn't just disable you with its glue, it distracted you as well. You'd get stuck and frustrated before turning on one another. It was happening now. Fukawa was ignoring her own bleeding wounds to scream at Rohan, he screamed back, and Haiji was snapping at the both of them.

Komaru had to stop herself from crying. How could they have failed everyone like this? How could she have failed everyone?

We Built This City had somehow 'cured' her of it, but maybe that was part of its defensive powers. Only it could only defend. Komaru couldn't fight Jataro alone, but how could she free them of this curse.

Her mind exploded. There was a way to free them. Someone could reverse the effects of this mind control.

"Rohan-sensei!" His name made him turn and glare. It was harsh enough that Komaru stumbled through her next words. "I-I-I bet you can't use your Stand on yourself. Y-You're so dumb you can't even write that you don't feel hatred for me."

He already had Heaven's Door out and writing the message. "Eat shit! I don't need a nothing like you telling me what I can't-" The pages on his chest didn't even close before his eyes widened. "That son of a bitch."

"The glue! It's the glue's smell!" Komaru screamed. Why wasn't he getting the message? Why was he taking so damn-

We Built This City let out another hum of energy and Komaru let the hatred flow out of her.

Rohan had just enough coherence to use Heaven's Door to remove his sense of smell first; before removing his own hatred of Fukawa and Haiji. It seemed like stopping yourself from hating one person was enough to give you time to break out of Judas Priest's spell. If only until you smelled the glue again.

He wrote down three commands for Fukawa. The first command was to stop hating everyone, the second was to lose her sense of smell, preventing Judas Priest from having a further effect, and then the last was that her body would seal the open scar. It defied biology but Fukawa's skin was already stretching the cover the scar.

*Heaven's Door is amazing.* Komaru thought to herself. No longer blinded by contempt and hatred, Rohan even wrote another command for himself, 'Shoot up ten metres in the air', already firing into the sky. It made Jataro yelp in shock. He landed safely behind her and began to apply the same command to Fukawa—who screamed in horror as she shot into the air.

"How did you break out of it?" He asked, back to her. Komaru tried to find the right way to describe it, too afraid of what he'd say about what she said to him, only for We Built This City to chirp. It explained enough to him. "I meant what I said."

"About how I'm a nothing?" She knew it, and deserved it, but that didn't stop it from hurting.
"That you could be a main character." Rohan said, even if he still sounded dejected. He turned to look at a still-enraged and struggling Haiji. "Do you trust him? All Killer Queen has to do is touch us, and that other Stand of his..."

"Other Stand?" Komaru didn't know he could have another Stand. Was that possible? Looking closely, there did seem to be something moving by Killer Queen's left hand. Maybe Rohan had better vision than her. But did she trust Haiji? "I trust him to help us contact the Future Foundation and save the adults."

Her reply was enough for Rohan. He wrote down the same sort of commands he wrote down for himself and Fukawa-to stop hating, stop smelling, and go into the air-on Haiji's left hand. The resistance-leader shot into the sky. He managed to stick the landing as well, but still looked mad.

It was only when he seemed to be gathering his thoughts that he realised what Rohan did.

He seemed shocked at his own loss of cool, so much that he couldn't find the words. "I-I-Yo-"

"It's okay." Komaru said, half-looking at Haiji and half looking over Fukawa. The clothes were hiding enough of the scar, even if they were now drenched in blood, but she wanted to make sure that Fukawa was okay. "What's important is that we bring him to justice."

Jataro had finally realised that his game was up and that he needed to get the job done. With the controller in hand, he pulled levers and pressed buttons and summoned his own robot, 'Priest Robot Doctor von Gerolt'. If he summoned it while they were stuck in the glue, rather than letting them bite at each other, he might have killed them.

But he didn't. Now the four of them were together again and knew what to expect. We Built This City would keep Komaru safe from Judas Priest, her Hacking Gun would break through the robots defences, and her friends were here to fend off the attack.

All four of them looked to each other. This wasn't going to be like the first time. They weren't just going to charge and attack before the robot came out. This time, they'd co-ordinate. This time, they'd stop him.

We're going to call the Future Foundation. We're going to be saved from this nightmare and I'm going home to my family. Komaru frowned and readied her Hacking Gun. The grip tightened as she glared towards Jataro. But first, I'm going to make you pay.

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First the Priest would reveal his face-suited for the Ultimate Pretty Boy-before being dragged away. Emboldened, the heroine would lead the party up to the top of the tower to speak with her brother.

It wouldn't go very well. Everyone who thought they'd be happy would become sad and angry, and everyone who thought they'd be unhappy became more miserable than they thought. Boo hoo!
A defeated group would return to the base to plan a bloody escape, when the Murralsee would attack! Oh no! Luckily, the brothers Zenyetta and Mondatta were safely hidden away during this.

But the adults became mad, especially when the heroine was lost, and their friends were dead. "Kill the kid!" They'd cry. "Don't matter who, just kill 'em!". Poor Hayato.

It was only because the angel was watching them that they didn't do it.

But there was good news! The party would unite again! The adults would feel hope! The heroine would defeat the Warriors of Hope! Hooray?

Only it wouldn't enough. And the Heroine would cry and cry until she began laughing.

Then despair would come.

"Yeah, I had a feeling that'd happen." Zenyatta muttered to himself. He was reading over Monyatta's shoulder and listened to the narration, before putting a hand on his little brother's shoulder. "I won't let them get you, Boingo. They'll have to get through my dead body first."

"I had Tohth search for a hiding place," Monyatta replied. He began to laugh, the same laugh that the people here would throw rocks at if it weren't for Zenyatta, and pointed to the western parts of the base. He could see a small entrance up ahead. "Only Komaru should find us here."

"Then let's go then." Murray and Hiroko were busy with something else. Something about files and stuff that gave the brothers a chance to slip away.

Zenyatta crouched to put his brother up on his shoulder when he felt a tug on his shirt collar. It wasn't like his brother to be quiet when it was just the two of them alone. His shyness only kicked in when around others. Zenyatta stopped himself and turned to his brother again, who was pointing down at the manga.

His face hadn't been this pale since reading of the Murralsee's attack.

"What's that?" As the elder brother began to read through the pages of Monyatta's manga, he began to see what Tohth was predicting. "Oh crap."

What else could he say?

It wasn't every day you learnt that Dio Brando was coming back.

Taichi Fujisaki/Hotline Bling: Dead
Takaaki Ishimaru/?????: Dead

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Stand Stats

We Built This City
**User: Komaru Naegi**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: C
- Range: C
- Durability: A
- Precision: C
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**
- Creates shield around user that cannot be penetrated but user cannot escape from. At full-power, the shield is air-tight and even outlasts user itself. Stand can be deployed towards those within 10m range of user but must be de-activated if already in use.

- Stand can render user immune to 'abnormal infections' directly or indirectly from Stands. Does not apply to injuries of such kind applied 'normally', even when from Stands. Requires at least partial concentration.

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**Smoke On The Water**

**User: Hiroko Hagakure**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: B
- Speed: E
- Range: B
- Durability: A
- Precision: D
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**
- User can manipulate smoke and its properties to a range of 50m. This includes, but is not limited to, forming 'limbs' that carry enough mass to land physical blows or restrain targets within range.

- User can increase the amount of smoke generated by a reaction at a range of 2m.

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**Judas Priest**

**User: Jataro Kemuri**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: C
- Range: B
- Durability: B
- Precision: C
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**
- Stand is capable of spitting out 'glue' from orifices at a certain angles. Trajectory and speed are reliant on the amount of glue fired and pressure on the body. When the glue makes an impact, it sticks onto
the surface and increases in stickiness relative to force used to escape. Only amounts to a certain amount of force. Glue can be burnt, drenched, and will slide off smooth enough surfaces.

Stand can manipulate pressure of skin to increase force of glue shot or manipulate angle fired.

The glue fired will emit a scent that effects those who smell it other than the user. Those affected will gradually escalate a sense of anger and hatred for those around them and the user themselves. This rage will build until they do everything in their power to kill those around them.

**Hotline Bling**
User: Taichi Fujisaki

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: E
- Speed: C
- Range: E
- Durability: E
- Precision: A
- Developmental Potential: D

**Abilities**
User is capable of enhancing the signal of any electronic communication device in hand i.e. faulty walkie-talkies can communicate from a sky-scraper's distance.

**Eyes Without A Face**
User: Haiji Towa

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: C
- Range: D
- Durability: A
- Precision: B
- Developmental Potential: C

**Abilities**
Stand activates whenever user has strong emotions about another person within a 5m range. Stand will place a hand on the user's face and another on the face of the target and use its suction cups to 'remove' face, voice and clothes from both and swap them around. Height, weight, and personality remain unchanged.

Stand can only be used one at a time. If the user has strong feelings about more than one person, the Stand will activate on the closest person to them.

User cannot stop the Stand once activated and it will only de-activate after the swap is made. User must calm down and feel strong emotions again for the target if they wish to reverse the effects.
Kotoko Utsugi was always good at hiding her emotions.

It was why she was always so popular in the acting circuits. Just give her a script to read from and she could do it super-easy, lemon-squeezy, and do it with a flair. Give her a song to sing and she'd sing it within at least five takes. Give her an emotion to feel and you'd swear she genuinely felt it.

Tell her to not cry when it hurt, and she'd bite down and breathe. Tell her to not think about the moans below and just squeeze and she'd do it, even when it seemed super-gross. Tell her to do it like her mother showed her with the men first and she'd do it.

Everyone was happy when she did it right. They said it was why they were gentle.

After all, it was good to be gentle, right? It meant you were being soft and caring. It meant that what you were doing should be liked by the other person. It may seem weird and strange, but your body knew what it wanted. It's why there were things like instincts and gut-feelings and gag reflexes.

Okay, not all the bodily instincts were right all the time, as Kotoko's father taught her, but it was important to listen to it. If the body didn't totally hate it, despite what the mind and soul thought, then you didn't really hate it. You were just confused. You're just a child after all. Just listen to the grown-ups and do as you're told.

Let them fuck you. Let them make up little fantasies and fuck you. Let them be gentle and pretend they were making love and not fucking you.

"You were right, it is good to listen to the body." Kotoko said, crouching as her elbows rested on her knees and her head held by her hands. "That's why I'm helping you now, Papa. I'm helping you, and Mama, and even that nice lady friend of yours."

Little Girls drooled behind her. It wasn't fair that her Stand had to look like that. It was super-gross and not cute at all. Stands weren't meant to be cute though, according to Dio, but useful to his cause.
If it was for Dio, it was fine, but a girl had needs!

Who'd want to go out shopping with a Stand that had dentures the size of its head? With hands double the usual size of something of its height? With fingers that coiled and turned like big sausages flopping about?

It got the job done, at least. Her parents and father's dental assistant had all forgotten about how it felt when Little Girls' bite had dug into their flesh. They were way more pre-occupied with how Dio's kind-of-cute-if-you-were-into-that friend was kicking them.

"Evil...Evil...Evil!" Each word was punctuated with another kick to each of the adults writhing on the floor. Pleasure and pain were mixed together in their screams. Pleasure from the air striking their skin and pain from the blows to the chest. "...You're monsters...all of you...you don't deserve Heaven...you don't even deserve this world..."

Dio had to step in at that point, especially since the guy was blubbering. He was definitely happy about his friend finally coming round to the whole 'slowly murder the Demons' plan, but this was meant to be Kotoko's big moment. The under-study wasn't meant to outshine the leading actress!

The oven dinged to signal that the coffee was finally done. Yay! Kotoko could finally give the demons the fuel they always wanted. Her mother used to give her some of her coffee, only it tasted weird and made Kotoko feel all funny and nice. It was only later that she realised what it was supposed to make easier.

Her father didn't like that. His 'friends' complained that it made her seem like a slut. Some people just lived in their own world, didn't they?

"I wish I wasn't all that cute." Kotoko confessed, slipping on the oven mitts and taking the boiling kettle out. The coffee itself probably tasted terrible but that wasn't the point. "It just gets you too much attention, especially when being an actress. Mama, I know you think the spotlight's great, but that's only 'cause you've never been in it. It's bright and it's yucky."

Kotoko's reply was another moan. It was pointless trying to talk to either of the three when their minds had already been blown by Little Girls' power. That didn't stop her from trying though.

It was important for the mood.

She moved over to the three, made to lean against each other, as they panted and shifted in place to maximise their sense of touch. Some people just had no shame. They didn't even apologise for the smell. And in the kitchen too.

"I think it's good that we're together. It's like we're a real family again. Me, Papa, Mama, and Papa's assistant. Just like it was when you were just a dentist." Kotoko turned to her father. "But wait! You're a surgeon, right? How could I have made that mistake? I guess I should try and make it up to-whoops!"

It looked like Kotoko made a mistake again.

Just as she was going to grab some cups, she accidentally raised her arms and dunked the entire boiling tea all over the three demons! What a klutz! They'd sure be mad with her.

If they found the ability to talk again. How must it have felt to feel boiling liquid all over your skin? If
even the slightest breeze could turn you into jelly, if even a kick to the stomach felt like a meteorite through the flesh, then how did this feel?

*It must have been like lava itself. Pouring all over their skin and flesh and burning it all away, reducing them to nothing, only they were still alive. Alive and able to feel every searing drop of tea sliding down their sensitive skin.*

A loud and ugly scream came from the assistant first. It was like those sit-com plots where the character who can't sing going for the high note and all the glasses break. Kotoko's parents joined in as well and they were forming a band. A band of demons screaming in hell.

0/10, would not play again. No one liked this music. Dio's friend was covering his ears and muttering to himself, the rest of the Warriors of Hope were doing the same and complaining about the noise, and even Dio seemed upset. That was too much for Kotoko.

"Papa, you hypocrite." Kotoko playfully scolded, Little Girls shoving one of its fingers down his throat. He could neither breath nor could the bile going up his throat actually go anywhere. "You need to quiet down. Never upset the VIP. The customer is always right. Don't vomit; swallow. That's what you taught me."

The two ladies had to get the same treatment. Kotoko decided to give the assistant the index finger—just like her father was getting—while she decided to be nice to her mother. She got a thumb down the throat.

They were still screaming. The feeling of a finger shoving its way through soft flesh had more than triggered their gag reflexes and they could probably feel the acidic waste get stuck in their throats. It was never a nice taste and Little Girls didn't enjoy feeling it on its fingers either.

They couldn't escape. Moving only turned their legs to jelly and none of them could overpower Little Girls in their states. Their heads looked like steamed half-peeled tomatoes with all that bright red skin and smoke coming off from them. It was a miracle that some of their vomit made it out of their mouths.

Dio firmly put a hand by the side of her arm. He knew that Kotoko hated gentility. He knew that touching Kotoko meant doing it slowly, loudly, and tough enough that it was to grab and not to hold. He knew what it was like to have everyone look at you and imagine you naked and doing stuff to them.

He was so cool and amazing. No one ever made him do the beast with two backs with demons, but they still leered at him like they wanted to. They wanted to make him into what they wanted from him. But nope! Dio turned all that around and showed those demons what he could do.

Kotoko even practised kissing with his poster. It was embarrassing when she got caught, but Monaca pinky-swore she wouldn't tell anyone what she saw and she'd never break that promise. Stick a needle in all demon's eyes, the two on the face and the one below the waist.

Dio was just too cool. He wasn't a kid, but he wasn't a demon either. Just one of a kind.

He whispered to her words of how they'd create Heaven. They'd create a world where you didn't have to worry about if your mother was going to not hold your hand this time. Or whether you did something wrong and were punished afterwards.
But she'd have to carry that rage inside her. Carry that will to take the Demons' crap and shove it down their throats until they choked on their own shit. To protect the legacy of Dio Brando and break everyone who challenged his rule.

Heaven would be a place free of lolicons and perverts; but only if Kotoko promised to be fierce with Dio's enemies. Everyone had to contribute to make sure that he accomplished his destiny.

As the Boss Demons choked and died, eyes long-since full from experiencing pain and pleasure like none other, Kotoko promised she'd be good. She'd do anything Dio wanted. She'd rip out the throats of anyone in his way and stuff it full of candy and then hit them with a bat until the candy fell out of their stomachs with all the guys and shit-stuffed intestines.

Just so long as he'd create the world where no one whispered that they'd be gentle with her.

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"Can't believe he's got me doing this," Hiroko muttered to herself. "Still, keeps me busy."

Rohan Kishibe. Hiroko remembered seeing that name back when Yasuhiro was just a kid and was reading Shonen Jump. Pink Dark Boy had kind of scared him but also interested him too; though he dropped it after one of the arcs got dark and he was growing out of manga.

And he was also hiding from the Kuzuryu Gang. It turned out that tricking the daughter of a Yakuza boss wasn't the best idea for making money.

Still, it wasn't like Rohan was a big celebrity. The only reason she was checking up on this 'Yoshikage Kira' name was because he seemed really desperate about it. Maybe he was a fellow mangaka? Or a friend?

No. She had the feeling that Rohan wasn't exactly the kind of guy who had friends.

The info she was looking for was still important. One problem with being stuck underground was that you didn't have access to a lot of technology, and most of the people around her tended to just mope and mutter. Mostly about how they were doomed or how that Boingo kid was a traitor.

But she was finding something. There were a few men who could be fooled by Hiroko's feminine charm and one of them had been a desk worker at the local police station; heard a lot of gossip about the latest busts and all. A certain name had come up before all this.

"Yoshikage Kira? Yeah, I know him." The guy leaned across and tried to be subtle about looking at her breasts. "Guys were talking about this big raid. Saw a picture of him; not that impressed, but those were the orders. Some new guy had kicked up a fuss and got pictures of this guy. Might have actually been the Hime Hand Killer."

That got her attention. The Hime Hand Killer had been the news of the day for a while, girls being afraid to go out alone or buying gloves to avoid attention, until The Tragedy had gone and destroyed the world.

No point in worrying about a serial killer when everyone around you was either a murderer or a
victim.

What did Rohan want with the Hime Hand Killer? Did he even know who they were? Hiroko decided that she'd ask him when he and the others got back from contacting the Future Foundation. Right now, she was more concerned with finding out more about this Kira guy.

There were a few survivors who worked for the Towa Group. Questioning them was a lot harder and Hiroko even had to resort to using some old tricks to loosen up their tongues. Smoke On The Water was great for making a space way smaller than it actually was.

Yoshikage Kira had arrived shortly after The Tragedy and managed to salvage some of his official documents and qualifications. He was perfectly suited for a mid-level position and was known for being a friendly, if distant worker, who was reliable but not enough to be shot up the ranks. Most people seemed surprised she wanted to know about him.

"Miss Hagakure, if I may be so bold," A soft voice echoed into Hiroko's private investigation/bedroom. She had to keep herself from jumping. "You wouldn't happen to have seen the Oingo Boingo Brothers anywhere, have you?"

"Not since Haiji and the kids decided to go off to Towa Tower. Why?" She asked.

"I fear that their fear of the adults has caused them to hide themselves, thinking it will make Boingo safe. It's causing some...anxiety among the adults." Murray's voice shifted, he seemed less sure of himself. "Fear is getting to them. If they let themselves fall further into despair, I fear that even Shinobu's son may face their wrath."

"You don't give yourself enough credit, Murray." Hiroko said, waving away his worries. "These people trust you and Haiji. You saved all of us from those kids and we don't forget that easily. They just need something to believe in."

"Perhaps you're right." Murray said, only to stare down at his hands "If only I were a man and not a machine. I might have had a Stand of my own..." He let out a growl. Hiroko was shocked that Murray could actually feel anger, but she supposed he felt the same powerlessness that everyone else here felt at times. "I could do something about everything that's happened. Not simply just go one at a time."

"You can't control everything. Sometimes you just gotta roll the dice and go with how it goes." Hiroko let out a puff of smoke from her cigarette. The memory of her marriage came back to her. "Try to rig it or interfere and it'll backfire. I learnt that a long time ago."

She tried to think of other things, less depressing things, as she looked at Murray. Come to think of it, he had been built by the Towa Group. The same company and same building where Yoshikage Kira had worked in for so long. It was a long-shot, but you didn't just turn down a lead.

Not to mention that Murray knowing something wouldn't be the weirdest thing to happen to Hiroko this week.

"Say, Murray," Hiroko leaned in and tried to read something behind those glowing white eyes. "How much do you remember about your pre-release days? Any consciousness?" She asked, trying to phrase it casually.

"I remember bits and pieces. I have the entire history of the Towa Family downloaded onto my hard-
drives. Would you like to hear it?” Murray sounded far too excited for Hiroko to say yes.

"Definitely after this is all over. No, I meant more about people and conversations." Hiroko had to play this delicately. Murray could be trusted to try and keep secrets, but he wasn't exactly a cool head. "Did the name Yoshikage Kira ever come up?"

Murray was silent for almost a minute, as if searching his memory banks, until he spoke up. "I'm afraid not. All I remember is talk about members of the Towa family, some positive and some less so. A few were less than complimentary about the President personally, the same with the Division Head, and even a few about Haiji."

"Really? He seems so reliable." Hiroko guessed people might have seen Haiji as stuffy or boring, but it didn't sound like it.

"Chaos can change a man." Murray said, shrugging his shoulders with a soft whirr. "I knew there was fire in him, when I saw him during those riots. He helped me guide the people down here where I set everything up. Nothing like the secretive and meek figure spoken of before. But you shouldn't believe everything I say about before. My vision back then was only developing. I thought Haiji was much taller than he was before. About 13cm taller than he was."

That got her attention.

"Really?" She asked.

Hiroko was about 171cm tall. If Haiji had been as tall as Murray thought, he should have towered over her, hell, he'd tower over nearly everyone at 188cm. But he was only just slightly taller than her.

For someone who seemed doubtful about his own abilities pre-awakening, Murray had it down to a precise amount. Which left Hiroko with two theories. The first was that Murray was in fact just wrong, and the second was that there was something wrong with Haiji.

Any other time, and she would have gone with the first idea. It just made more sense and was simpler; there was a rule about the simplest solutions.

Only there was that look on Rohan's face. Absolute determination and certainty when he told her to find information about Yoshikage Kira. That this was a danger to the Resistance and to Komaru and Fukawa as well.

What are you up to, Rohan? What didn't you want to say in front of everyone? Hiroko knew that it was a long shot. It was pretty likely that she wouldn't find anything and was chasing a dead-end.

But it wasn't like she was lacking for them anyway. The worst that would happen would be learning a few embarrassing stories about her fearless leader.

"Murray, tell me more about Haiji." Hiroko put on a friendly smile and stubbed out the cigarette. She turned her chair so that she was fully facing Murray instead of just turning her head. Give him her full attention. "I only missed a day, I know, but humour me. Any funny stories you remember hearing about him? How different was he from the real deal?"

"I'm glad you asked," Murray beamed before laughing boldly. It was like he was trying to be those old Western heroes with that booming laugh. "Like two friends after an eventful day, we're simply talking the night away!"
Murray was being a bit too high-energy about it but Hiroko could forgive that. Better he was enthusiastic than leering, and it reminded her of Yasuhiro. She wondered if he was safe where he was. She heard that he had escaped Hope's Peak when it became a sight for a 'Mutual Killing Game'.

Did he have a Stand of his own? It was probably something cool that he could show off to his friends.

A part of her felt bad for luring Murray into telling these stories just for information, but Hiroko needed this information. If Rohan thought that Yoshikage Kira—the Hime Hand Killer himself—was still around then that was a threat. She couldn't just let him roam free in this camp.

She'd find out what she could about Haiji Towa before all of this. Maybe it was just him having to be the man people needed in a crisis, or maybe it was something worse. Hiroko wouldn't find out unless she asked though.

First, she'd need to ask why he always had his shirt tucked in.

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So someone was finally on Yoshikage Kira's trail.

The last remnant of Dio Brando, or 'Vizier Murralsee' as the Warriors of Hope knew this form, might have smiled to himself if it were not for the limitations of the Murralsee suit. It had its benefits. A pure black armour that sacrificed mobility for strength had added to the intimidation factor of his appearance.

He could not fight. Not without Monaca's aid. Her skill with machinery was an unrecognised blessing for him, but it meant that he was reliant on her whims and mercies. Unless he revealed himself, of course. But that would risk the task for which he had been assigned.

The chest began to hum, creating a soft tune that only Dio could hear, making him smile inside. Yes, this armour did have its advantages.

It also gave him another factor. The ability to simply sink into the dark and jagged throne that he had claimed for his own. One might have asked why a mere 'Vizier' was granted a throne of their own, but not the Warriors of Hope. They simply ignored him until it was time to speak with him.

It was enlightening to see the children in action. Dio had expected that Masaru would be the first of the group to fall, and that Jataro's complexes would keep him from landing a final blow, but there were things he never assumed would come to be.

The way that Nagisa had simply rolled over for Monaca's leadership had been informing. Dio had hoped that there might have been a struggle or some form of resistance, but no. Nagisa was letting his affections control his logic. The need for the approval of others.

*I always told him that it would be his undoing. That Nirvana's power required him to overcome this.* Dio thought to himself. The fact that Nagisa happily stayed under Monaca's boot told him everything.
Nirvana Act 3 would simply remain a dream.

Monaca, on the other hand, had utterly embraced the thought of leadership. It was like looking into a distorted mirror of himself, creating a younger image of himself in the form of Monaca Towa. He'd never have been able to do all this at the age of ten.

He was still fearful of his father and desperate for the drunkard's affection. It disgusted Dio to think about. It was why he paid little mind to Monaca and Kotoko's 'moment', to avoid the memories coming back to him.

The Warriors of Hope were more than the symbols of the new generation that would be lifted up by Heaven. They were the symbols of the past that Dio had triumphed over. Even Kotoko resembled it somewhat.

Had Dio not been so wilful and angry, would his agent have sold him around like a whore? Possibly. Monaca was the best suited to lead them. She kept the true mission of this crusade a secret from the others, who thought the aim was to create a miniature Heaven. As if such a thing could be created on anything less than the scale of the Earth itself.

No. She would have no rivals for Dio's attention this time. She had taken Dio's interest in Nirvana more personally than he had thought. The plan to re-create Dio Brando would be the result of Monaca's work and her work alone.

Until then, however, the Vizier had his own parts to play.

"Nagisa, you say that you have located the Resistance?" The Vizier Murrslee voice was not like the others. It was distorted, the echo crackling throughout the air, as red eyes shined down on the child. He looked so prim and proper. "Are the Murralsee ready to strike?"

"I was just about to give the order." Nagisa replied. It was just as Dio expected of him. Smart and to the point, even after turning to goo from the slightest physical affection from Monaca.

"Demons think they're so smart to hide underground. Just sitting and waiting for someone to save them." Monaca held her fists and sharply exhaled, as if she was an anime character getting ready to fight herself. "Like ants, we'll flush them out with a firecracker and drown them with a hose."

"Without Fujisaki's Hotline Bling, they can't contact the Future Foundation." Nagisa smirked. "Heaven will be reached from the mountain we'll leave from their corpses."

Kotoko squealed in delight. "Shingetsu and Monaca are too cool. I'd be super-scared if we weren't best buds." Her voice dropped and all joy left her eyes then. It was as if she was a machine herself. "I'll make sure that they're all hunted down."

"Kotoko, maybe you should go with the army," Monaca said, shuffling in her wheelchair. How could they be so blind as to her secret? Did they truly never see her bed-room? Dio had never been so unobservant as a child. "Little Girls is a super-scary Stand. Maybe if you used it, you might be able to win the Hunting Game. Too many of them are cheating with that base, especially that Big Sis."

"You're right! That cute girl needs to learn a thing or two." Kotoko said, sticking out her tongue to
the side and winking in a pose. Was it from her old show?

Dio was done being ignored. It was time for the Vizier to make their voice heard again.

"Then it is decided." The crackle got all three children's attention. A withered hand pointed to Kotoko, even as she gagged at the skeletal look. "Kotoko will lead the assault and steal away Komaru Naegi. Her spirit shall be broken," Dio was unsure of what Monaca was planning. Komaru's We Built This City was impressive, but Kotoko's methods weren't Stand-exclusive. He could only trust in her plan. Dio then motioned his other hand to Nagisa. "And the Resistance shall be crushed by our numbers. Then Heaven shall be reached; as is the will of Dio."

The three children turned towards the golden shrine by the side of the room. Masaru was the only one allowed a funeral and for his picture to be placed on the bottom-right of Dio's own. Monaca had stopped caring after that, or at least the only one who could build these monuments had been vanished.

Monaca was dedicated in letting the competition die off. Or whatever happened to them.

He'll be upset about that. Monaca was meant to work together with them. Dio thought to himself. Would his friend be upset with him as well? No. He's embraced I, Dio, after everything. He'll accept this as well when the results come about.

The children bowed their heads and recited a Buddhist prayer that Dio knew nothing about. It was the act of worship that mattered to Dio. The genuine loyalty of those who had seen how rotten and decayed this world was. The ones who knew the need to bring about Heaven.

Monaca had refused to tell him, as Vizier Murralsee, what her plan was. He doubted that even Komaeda, that piece of shit who hid away his hand like it was a curse (then why did he dare commit sacrilege in the first place?), knew what the plan truly was. All he knew was that Komaru had to reach Monaca.

Dio Brando was meant to be restored, but how? Dio could have revealed himself as a fragment of the original Dio, but would that be enough to satisfy Monaca? He knew her better than she knew herself. She didn't have Dio's eternal hunger. Once sated, she'd either evolve or stagnate.

So he had to wait for Monaca and trust in whatever she was doing. It was ironic that the Ultimate Master, the one who ruled over Hope, would now have to hope in a child's plan to see if this was true restoration.

This had better work. Dio calmed himself by thinking of the Warriors of Hope's continuing and undying loyalty, but also of Makoto Naegi. The Ultimate Hope that had cheated Dio out of his destiny. The one who ruined his ascension into Godhood. I will have my vengeance on all of you. But you will suffer the most, Naegi. I will turn your Hope into ashes if it's the last thing I do.

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"Fukawa, you didn't mean it, right?" Komaru asked, her voice already shaking. "You wouldn't have killed me if Makoto agreed to send in the Future Foundation."
"I'd have done what I could to keep him safe. You're no different from Rohan or Haiji." Fukawa replied. She didn't look Komaru in the eye, where they were probably already glistening with tears.

What a baby.

"We wouldn't have let her kill you," Haiji gave Fukawa a look; the same one he directed at her since they spoke with Naegi. "Although, I think it's clear where her loyalties are."

What else was going to happen when Komaru finally got to call the Future Foundation? She was always going to turn back to goo and beg for them to come and save her. Let someone else take on the burden of saving this city and everyone in it. Haiji and Rohan were the same way. They didn't want to even try and finish the job they started.

It had to be Naegi who was on the other line. The big-hearted dummy who'd probably march into Towa City itself if it meant getting his little sister back in his arms. Haiji was more than happy to add onto Komaru's case; talking about how everyone was counting on him. That people like Hayato—who only just heard of Taichi's death—were going to be killed.

At least Komaru had the excuse of being pathetic. Those men were just exploiting Naegi, trying to play with his emotions to get what they wanted.

What about Byakuya? Didn't he deserve help as well? He was the one who came down to Towa City himself to rescue Komaru and the price was his imprisonment by those damn kids. If the Future Foundation came charging in, he'd be lucky if they killed him quickly.

That wasn't their style though. They'd slowly peel off his skin and shake salt over the flesh. Televising his slow agonising death as he screamed without a tongue. They already had him drugged to control Gold; it'd be easy to find ones that didn't dull pain.

So that was why Fukawa had to follow the damn script. That was why she couldn't let Naegi try to get the Future Foundation to act. She had to threaten Komaru's life.

It didn't go so well. Rohan was like a rottweiler defending its owner when he had Heaven's Door command her to stand completely still. Haiji was worse when he brought out Killer Queen. Now if Naegi didn't send help, Haiji 'couldn't guarantee' Fukawa's safety.

Hayato was screaming in panic, Komaru pleaded with him to stop, and Rohan had taken out his command and seemed ready for anything. It was absolute chaos. Their unity against Judas Priest was a thing of the past.

The last thing they heard from Naegi was a plea for them to calm down when the transmission ended and the lights went out.

It was a long-and very distressing-march back down Towa Tower, fighting off the Murralsee, as they remained in near-total darkness and Fukawa had to rely on the others to get her out. The only tolerable one was Hayato and that was only because he wasn't just thinking of himself. Of how he could avoid this whole mess.

As they got outside, nothing had changed in the mood of the group. Komaru was meek and trying to be friendly, Hayato was asking about his parents, Haiji was barely keeping it together—one insult and he'd explode—while Rohan was quiet. Quiet as in he didn't say a single word since they left the top floor.
So here they were, about to have this argument.

Komaru's voice was already shaking. "But we're friends..."

"Don't just throw around words like that as if that'll make me do what's convenient for you!" Fukawa snapped. It was only natural that someone run-of-the-mill like Komaru would do this. It was what most people did with Fukawa. "I'm not falling for it."

"That's not what I..." Komaru trailed off and sniffed. "I thought we were friends."

That was what everyone says when you didn't do something they wanted. They'd prey on your feelings and needs and make it about them. Do the work for them, or do this thing for them, because you're friends. But it wasn't friendship they wanted from her.

It was just them being lazy, or playing some kind of joke on Fukawa. A way to take advantage of her. Komaru was just doing the same, to have someone else save her. This was why it was better to push people away.

They can't hurt you if the distance is wide enough.

Fukawa couldn't keep her distance, though, because she had a mission. She needed to get Komaru onto that air-ship. That was the only reason why she was curious as to Komaru had turned and began to walk away.

"Where are you going?" She asked.

"We're going back to the base." Haiji said, moving to Komaru's right and keeping a firm grip on Hayato's hand. He gave Fukawa a dirty look. "Not that it's any of your business. Why not stay here and wait for someone else, I'm sure the Warriors of Hope would be grateful for all you've done for them. Maybe you can be with your boyfriend." Haiji looked down to Hayato. "Hayato, stay close to us. It's dangerous outside."

The kid seemed wary. Good. Smells Like Teenage Spirit hissed in approval and, invisible to all but Fukawa, a soft green mist wafted around Hayato to reveal a 55% symbol above his head. A way to show that Fukawa slightly liked him, compared to the 25%-strong dislike-symbol that Haiji had on him. There was something about that guy that pushed Fukawa the wrong way.

She was free of her initial impression—which in itself was only because he reminded her of Byakuya!—and could see the mask that no one else noticed.

"Omaru, you really think you can just go out on your own?" Fukawa asked, making sure her voice showed her disbelief. Was she really just going to go backwards? "Someone who's been spoiled for protection and can't do anything alone?"

"Can't do-" Komaru didn't hide her shock. She stopped and turned to face Fukawa again, this time looking angry. "I've been doing my fair share, Fukawa. We Built This City may not be for combat, but we've been doing our best. Saying I've done nothing alone is just too far!"

"Would you like a pat on the head? A hug? Is that why you're going back to the robot?" Fukawa growled. Why did Komaru have to be like this and why wasn't the damn number over his head not lowering from 75%? Fukawa just had to ignore it and glared at Komaru. "Too bad because you're not
getting it from me. I don't reward people for not just finding an excuse to hide under the bed and cry for help. To have someone else do the heavy work."

"You're so mean... I try to impress you and you're just so mean..." Komaru closed her eyes and her voice grew louder. "This is why you don't have any friends!"

Fukawa was shocked that she had been so shocked. Komaru wasn't just some endless foundation of false niceties, Judas Priest should have made that clear, but this had been the first time that Komaru was genuinely upset with Fukawa. The first time that she was being angry.

But Fukawa knew this was coming. It was what everyone did when they realised that someone else was right. They couldn't win the argument so they decided to just win by insulting the opponent. Make it clear that, if they didn't do as they were told, they could be lonely forever.

That was fine. Fukawa knew how to build distance. She wasn't like Rohan, just lounging against a lamppost with that damn dead look in his eyes. Why wasn't he complaining about Komaru being some kind of main character? Why wasn't he doing anything?

*Go down. Go down!* Fukawa snapped internally as that number on Komaru's head stayed the same. Why was she the one feeling bad about this when it was Komaru's fault?

Hayato took a step towards Komaru and looked at Fukawa. To think an eleven year-old now pitied her. "Komaru, I think you hurt her-"

"It's best that this happens." Haiji said. He kept a firm grip on Hayato's hand and barely managed to hide the smile in his eyes. This was a chance to get rid of her, after all.

"That's fine... I like being on my own," Fukawa kept her voice steady. "I wouldn't want to be friends with someone like you anyway."

"What do you mean?" Komaru asked, anger and hurt mixing together.

"You, Haiji, even Rohan," Fukawa pointed a finger at Komaru and let rip. She wasn't going to hold back anymore. "You're all just being leeches. You want Naegi and the Future Foundation to fight and die so that you can all have your old lives again. You don't want to fight for it yourselves because you're scared of getting hurt. Because someone else is meant to take the burden and do all the work. You all just think of being 'saved' and gives yourselves reasons to not do it yourself. 'I can't do anything' and 'I can't risk it here' is what you tell yourselves to avoid the big fights. You're nothing like your brother, Omaru. Though I can't say I like his coddling style. Seems like your parents were coddlers too, Haiji."

Not like Fukawa's parents. A father apathetic to her existence, two mothers who only saw her as an anchor to the man they once loved, and none of the three willing to even hold Fukawa.

Komaru wasn't sobbing, but the tears ran down her face still. Fukawa ignored the 75% above Komaru's head, just as she ignoring the dragging and poisonous feeling in her chest after venting. She wouldn't feel bad for saying the truth.

"I've had enough." Komaru turned to Rohan and went from upset to apologetic. Fukawa knew there was a favourite; this just proved it. "I'm sorry I couldn't be who you hoped I could be, Rohan-sensei."
"It's fine. It's all fine." Rohan pushed himself off the lamppost. His voice carried none of its energy or power, closer to those hopeless adults underground than anything else. "I think it's this world. I just...don't fit in it. Like a round peg down a square hole, I'm just butting heads and getting nowhere." Rohan sighed and began to walk back the way they came to this building. "Let's just go back to the base. Not like I'm doing anything of worth here."

"So even you're giving up?" Fukawa hissed. She needed something. Anything. Just to prove that there was some fire in the others left.

"I gave up a long time ago." Rohan replied. He looked up the blood-red sky. "Everything I've done here was just...delaying the inevitable." He looked back at her and barely gave a slight glare. "Shouldn't you be hanging out with those kids? You'd be more welcome there."

She bit back the shock, both at his words and the implication behind them. There was no way that he knew about the offer she had been forced to accept that by that weirdo. Could he? Did he read it from Heaven's Door?

Fukawa shook her head. There was no way that was possible. She had to just focus on her mission and follow the others, stalking behind them like a bad smell.

"Why are you following us?" Komaru asked.

"I have my own reasons." Fukawa didn't want to give any ground to her.

"Let me make one thing clear, Fukawa." Haiji let go of Hayato's hand, letting him move straight to Komaru's hand instead, and looked down on Fukawa. How had she missed the abyss behind those eyes before? "You speak out against what I am now forced to advise the council-because of you-and you will leave the base. Resist and I will use force."

That was fine. Fukawa wouldn't want to stay in that pile of garbage housing people who had lost their ability to fight anyway. All she needed was to bring Komaru with her when they'd leave and they'd be back on track. They would be on their way to saving Byakuya and stopping those kids.

Fukawa ignored the way that Komaru leaned closer to the others now. How she seemed to rely on them more than she did with Fukawa. She ignored the fact that the 75% symbol over Komaru hadn't changed one bit.

She especially ignored her own number dropping to 27%.

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This is why no one reads your manga anymore!

Rohan wondered how long he had been pretending that he wasn't the problem.

People didn't drop off from Morioh Town because they were over-saturated by mediocre-at-best shonen that only offers wish-fantasies. They stopped reading because they knew this story didn't speak to them. It was a story of a dead world that only he remembered.
A world he couldn't even make-up right. All those stories he barely listened to because they came from Josuke, the ones he imagined differently because of how he viewed the people involved, and the desperation soaked in each page. Who would see that as a realistic setting?

*Dark and bitter tales about people they don't like and act like it's being deep when it's just being mean!*

Pink Dark Boy could have its sad moments. Moments meant to inspire emotion rather than a five-second smile. Only Rohan once made sure that there was some satisfaction at the end of each arc, until he decided that writing things as he saw them was more important. He sacrificed artistic integrity for his delusions.

*A mean, childish, bitter old man who hates everything and everyone and acts like he's smart because of it.*

When had he let his cynicism take over his writing? When did the final battle feel so empty and meaningless? Because what was the point in defeating Kira if Morioh Town now didn't exist? If the lives saved simply never happened?

Nihilism took hold of him.

*We don't want to read Rohan Kishibe's stories anymore!*

Komaru was right. That was why Rohan was languishing at the bottom of the ranks, kept only because of limited mangakas, volume sales, and his own fame. He had become one of the writers he hated most. Those who created worlds just to spit on them and insult the readers.

Rohan wasn't meant to be in this world. People could feel it and were repelled from the stories he wrote. His stories didn't even suit it anymore; *Morioh Town* was an ode to a place no longer in existence and a message to people who didn't exist. *Bloody Games* was a story that rang too true for some people.

His isolation only distanced himself further from people.

What was he even doing anymore? What was the point in Rohan Kishibe if no one would read his manga? If people didn't find his stories interesting? There was none. Pink Dark Boy was all he had left and the inspiration was dying. Everything that had happened was getting to him.

Did his stories even reach anyone anymore? Or was Pink Dark Boy a zombie-series now; the readers only staying on to see how a once-great tale would finally die.

*I just wanted to finish it. To see if at least the ending can reach someone. Then I can go back without regrets.* Rohan knew where he wanted to go back to. For a moment, on this little adventure, he had thought that wouldn't be necessary, but Komaru had reminded him of why he had to leave this place.

Maybe he'd regain his spark when he was with his friends again. Until then, he had to just get through this whole crisis and get back to work.

"Can it wait?" Rohan asked. His voice had none of its usual passion. "Let's just see how this meeting goes and we can talk about it then."

"You sure?" Hiroko raised an eyebrow, before shrugging. "Don't blame you. Whatever happened
hasn't been pretty on the girls either."

Komaru and Fukawa weren't talking to each other. At least, nowhere near as much as they were before. Add on Rohan's epiphany and the whole group had been practically silent, beyond the sounds of battle, on the journey back.

The camp wasn't exactly happy. They'd have probably fallen into irreversible despair if 'Haiji' hadn't managed to avoid giving a straight answer on the Future Foundation. All he said was that they were one step closer to escaping this nightmare.

It didn't help when Shinobu laid eyes on Hayato and vice versa.

"Hayato! I'm so glad that you're safe." She howled, while wrapping her arms around him and crying into his shoulder. "I'm sorry we didn't listen to you about the Murralsee helmets. We should have kept an eye on you during those riots. How did you even escape?"

"They ignored me. I tried to go back to our place, but it was..." Hayato didn't say anything. His sheet-white face said it all, as did the general pattern of Towa City now. He probably saw a pile of corpses. "I wandered around until I found Mister Fujisaki. We tried to test his Stand-to see if we could call anybody-but then the Murralsee noticed me and actually tried something."

"What do you mean listening? What did he say?" Someone had asked. Shinobu had probably thought it was curiosity, instead of suspicion, and spoke before 'Haiji' could do anything.

"My son's good with cameras and recording equipment." Shonobu explained, as if those words were going to reach them. "He heard something on the helmets and disassembled one of them when the TV show was giving out merchandise. His father got upset about it, though, and didn't-"

"He knew about the helmets? Why didn't he say anything?" One of the adults cried out.

"This is like those brothers again. Those kids are sending in moles!" Another snapped.

The mood was turning toxic when 'Haiji' threw a coin into the air. Killer Queen had already charged it when it activated and caused a tiny explosion, too small to hurt anyone but large enough that it caught everyone's attention. The message had been clear and Shinobu and Hayato practically fled for 'Haiji's' quarters.

Everyone who mattered was now in the meeting room. Komaru had been the latest to arrive, muttering about how she was tying her shoes or something, and seemed too specific about not seeing anyone. It was likely that she met those brothers who were hiding out here. The ones who didn't want all the attention.

The meeting was blunt. 'Haiji' made it clear that they should start plans to evacuate Towa City as soon as possible and just accept losses as a part of life. The plan was just finding things that could float, heading to the coast, and then swimming to the mainland.

It wasn't a plan designed to save people.

"If we start assembling scrap metal and use it for life-rafts for the injured, we might be able to go far enough on the shore that we can swim the rest of the way." 'Haiji' explained. He was trying to polish shit. "We just need a map of the city and then we can use the sewers to reach a beach-point."
"Going out in the open? We'll be open targets for them!" One of the council members screamed.

"If the Future Foundation doesn't commit forces, then we'll be starved out." 'Haiji' looked at everyone with dead eyes. "High casualties are the price to pay for this."

It was Murray's turn to suggest something and his plan was naive. The kind of stuff that a manga looking to please its readers rather than give its happy moments actual meaning would reward. The idea that they could stop the kids themselves. So naturally Komaru backed him up.

"I can feel it in their hearts. They can laugh and play, but their souls are weeping at what they are doing." The machine told her, just before the meeting began, as he tried to get their support. "They yearn for their parents, even if they do not know it."

What would have been the point? No one would have listened, or even believed the story. Even if they did, removing the helmets from the children would be impossible unless they somehow just stormed the air-shop against an army of hundreds of Murralsee.

It fell to Fukawa to be the voice of contempt.

"You're just giving excuses." She said. It seemed that she didn't take the idea of just running away that well. Probably because she wanted everyone to attack. "So desperate to avoid a fight that you'd accept everyone else dying, just so you can live. All the people who can't make the journey, they're just dead, aren't they?"

"We have to be pragmatic." 'Haiji' said, waving away her concerns as if she was a five year-old having a tantrum. "If it makes you feel any better, we'll be giving it a few more days to gather supplies and find other Stand users. Komaru and Hiroko deserve that much for all they've done. Then we're leaving."

"Fine. Just run away and hope the people behind you are good enough meat-shields." Fukawa snapped. Rohan might have taken her side, if there was an actual point in him doing so. As if he mattered. "Let's go, Omaru."

Maybe Fukawa, after so much time getting it, naturally expected Komaru's obedience.

"You're wrong." Komaru said, unable to stop herself even as Fukawa's face paled. She finally seemed to realise what Komaru was hearing whenever she spoke. "You don't understand the feelings of the weak! We're not like you; someone special like the Ultimate Writer who can go to Hope's Peak and could help defeat Dio. How could you understand what it's like to be weak and unable to do anything?"

"I don't...understand?" Fukawa's shock gave way to anger. "What kind of bullshit is that?" She pointed to herself while Rohan held out an arm to stop Hiroko. This needed to happen. "I'm a collection of inferiority complexes into a person. I had to be Syo to fight Dio and even then it was all Naegi and ghosts that won it. But I don't just throw up my hands and use it as an excuse to do nothing. Haiji's plan means people dying for nothing! They can't even stand up for themselves. What's going to change from this plan, other than a floating pile of corpses? So don't even try to write me off as some chosen one!"

Rohan was taken aback. He'd never seen this actual side of Touko Fukawa before. The side that could actually takes hit at herself, that actually recognised herself when she looked in the mirror, and more. She was no main character, but there was something in her.
"I really have lost my touch, Rohan thought to himself. *I'm a character that has nothing to do with this story.*"

"Fukawa, Komaru, please!" Murray cried out, stepping in between the two, only for Fukawa to growl at him in turn. "We have to stay unified and-
"

"Breach!" One of the adults slammed the door open. He barely made the first few steps before falling to the floor face-first, looking at them with a bloodied nose. "There's been a breach!"

The only people that stayed behind were Shinobu and Hayato, who retreated into 'Haiji's' room. The rest of them ran out to find the giant metal door that acted as the entrance to the base was being torn apart by a legion of black metallic claws. The door itself wasn't destroyed, but there were widening holes that the Murralsee exploited.

Some were already charging out of the bottom areas, others were crawling to the walls and ceiling, while some even just smashed through and fell to the ground. It was watching water burst out from a broken dam.

Just like a flood, anyone that was even close to the Murralsee were being swept away by the violence. There must have only been a few hundred adults in this camp and Rohan could see that there were easily more Murralsee ahead. The sewers might even be stuffed with them.

"This is all that brat's fault!" One of the council members cried out. Their voice was torn between fury and despair.

"Shit." Hiroko nearly bit off her cigarette as Smoke On The Water began to slither out from the cigarette and insides of her jacket. "Smoke On The Water can't kill them all."

"Who knows how many there are." 'Haiji' said. His palms were bleeding from where the nails were digging in. "We'll just have to retreat back and hold stalemate. Maybe bleed them out while getting the emergency escape."

"Komaru!" A child's voice screamed. Everyone turned to see the Oingo Boingo Brothers running straight towards the group. In Boingo's hand, held as if it were the Holy Grail itself, was his manga. "You have to stay and protect everyone!"

"Boingo? I thought you wanted to stay hidden?" Komaru barely kept her eyes off the destruction and death around her.

"You!" One of the council members snapped. Rohan should have tried to remember their names and faces, but they were such copy-pasted paranoid-civilians that there didn't seem to be much point. "This is all your fau-" 'Haiji' raised a hand and they silenced themselves.

"Toth predicted this. It says that you'll help fight them off." Boingo showed a picture of Komaru, Fukawa, Hiroko, Haiji, and Rohan, all fighting in a sea of fire, blood, and explosions. There was then another picture of a sea of hands holding Komaru up, to both the real and pictured girl's shock. "Then you'll be held up high."

"B-But." Komaru stopped herself. People were dying by the second and they were just standing and talking. Resolution ignited in her eyes and she readied her Hacking Gun. "No. There's no other option."
“I will assist.” Murray stepped forward and faced the dark horde playing games with the corpses of the adults too close to the door to have escaped. “Miss Komaru, I cannot allow you to face this many alone. We do not have many far-range fighters. I will have to do.”

How was that going to work? Murray was a tough fighter, that was undeniable, but he was just one machine. A machine that relied on his fists and legs to take out the Murralsee one by one wasn’t going to be able to handle something of this size, especially from a far-range.

Hiroko tried to put it gently. "Murray, I don't think home defence is what we need right now."

"That’s where you're wrong, Miss Hagakure.” Murray took another step forward, planted himself firmly into the ground, turned back with what could only be called a smirk. "I'm battlefield recovery.”

Murray's body shifted. Sky-blue skin turned over, arms and legs began to disassemble themselves, and even Murray's head itself began to change shape. Every type of gun under the sun began to sprout out from his body. Out of his torso was a heavy machine-gun, his arms and legs carried AK-47s and shot-guns from wires, and even the head itself revealed a series of red aiming-lights that dotted the Murralsee. Rohan lost count of how many firearms came out of Murray's body.

No one could say a word; only staggered sounds of shock came out from them. Why wouldn't they? This was a twist that even Rohan Kishibe didn't see coming!

*He's basically a tank with machine-guns attached!* Rohan thought. Murray let out a battle-cry and began to open-fire on the Murralsee.

It was a hail of bullets, artillery, and even a few rockets that struck the tide of the Murralsee. The machines could barely give Murray a glimpse before the bullets tore through their bodies and even pierced through the Murralsee behind them. No matter the type, they were turned into a pile of tattered metal against the fury of the assault.

The adults, when they weren't running away, let out a cheer for their saviour keeping them from harm once again. It wasn't a perfect assault; the Murralsee on the walls and ceilings were still up there, but those that tried to drop down were torn to shreds by Murray's assault.

"Miss Komaru!” Murray screamed at the top of his voice. With the noise of his assault, Rohan wondered if there were speakers included as well to amplify his voice. "I can only clear out the gate! You'll have to handle the rest."

Komaru nodded and We Built This City emerged, both Stand and user with determined looks in their eyes. Fukawa already had the taser in hand and shocked herself, unleashing Genocider Syo herself, and 'Haiji' pulled out one of the last remaining pebbles, coins, and other small knick-knacks he had in his pocket. They wouldn't be much, but they were what he had, and would work with Killer Queen.

Hiroko was already generating more than enough smoke using Smoke On The Water and her cigarette's smoke together. Even Oingo had a giant tire-iron in hand in case some of the Murralsee broke through. Rohan couldn't do anything but watch as others fought this battle.

That didn't mean he wasn't prepared himself. Rohan Kishibe had to consider many things today, one being that he was no longer the mangaka he once was. That everything he'd been doing in this world had been a delusion.
But not this. Not stopping these machines, tools of the Warriors of Hope, and not making sure that both Komaru and the finished works of *Bloody Games* escaped this city.

Rohan wasn't going out without a bang.

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"Haiji!" One of the adults cried out. "How could you be leaving us? It's just one girl. On some brat's advice too!"

Kira had never been happier than his nail-clipper was in his pocket. After he rescued Komaru, he could clip off the nails and remove any sign that this dumbass was really saying what he was saying. His nails would be unsightly otherwise.

There was a reason for their displeasure. Some of their friends were dead and it was obvious that the Warriors of Hope knew where the Resistance was hiding. Not only that, but despite Murray's show of firepower, it was obvious from the bullets and flames that he had used everything he had to end the attacking Murralsee.

But why the hell did they always have to get it wrong? Was it too much to ask for intelligent soldiers?

Mondatta had told the truth. Komaru had found them, tried to get them to safety, and was then stolen away by—according to Mondatta—Kotoko Utsugi of the Warriors of Hope. It had been according to Tothth's prophecy that Komaru would be held up high for her actions and it came to be.

It was just that she was held up high by a Stand kidnapping her.

"Are you telling me that I should simply let her go?" Kira asked in turn. He couldn't even hide the anger from his face. "Let's ignore the fact that she just tried to save us. Let's be pragmatic. Only six people here have actually managed to kill a Murralsee, out of the thousands hiding out in this city, and you want to just let one of them go away? You want to lose one of the few non-stand weapons we have?"

"You're just gonna slow me down." Syo said, somehow maintaining coherence despite speaking with her tongue out. Kira had to keep himself from looking in disgust as the appendage wiggled. The serial killer shook Rohan, who was piggy-backing on her. "Riders of Rohan here doesn't weigh that much. You're look a bit heavier, no offence."

"His Heaven's Door can issue commands that can give me an equal momentum, correct?" Kira asked. Syo looked to Rohan who gave him a pointed look. That tended to mean yes. "Then simply write the command to keep pace with Syo and that should do it."

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"What makes you think I'll do that?" Rohan asked. "You're not exactly one for open battle." He added, almost too quickly.

*How much do you know, Kishibe?* Kira asked himself. He'd use Mondatta to find out, but then that'd risk revealing his identity to the child himself. The time for disappearing people went away with
Murray's show of force.

He'd have to play the pragmatist for this.

"The last time we all faced one of them, we almost lost," He said. The memory of Judas Priest-and what it almost made him say-still troubled him. Rohan's face went pale just thinking about it. Good. It was working. "Now you want to go and fight another one of them while they have one of us trapped? There's strength in numbers, Kishibe."

There was also Murray's words to consider. The machine had approached him the fury of the chaos, as everyone blamed the Oingo Boingo Brothers, Shinobu and Hayato, and even Fukawa and Rohan. Kira had been worrying that this would evolve into a mutiny when the machine approached him.

"If you want to escape this city, the path lies with Komaru Naegi." Murray whispered. "My personal advice would be to let the Kawajiri family go with you. I cannot protect the brothers and them, at the same time, whilst also ensuring order."

"How did they find us?" Kira had asked. What was Murray planning?

"The people you need to worry about have always known where you are. They wanted Komaru. The next attack will certainly see retribution, if handled poorly." Murray shifted his vision towards the Kawajiris, who was being protected by Fukawa and Rohan against the mob. "It's in our mutual best interest if you ensure Komaru's safety."

"And how long will our mutual interests align?"

"Relax, Haiji. By the time they divide, there'll be no reason for me to reveal your secret." Murray made a noise that almost sounded like a smirk. A new and annoying habit. "Keeping an eye on Rohan Kishibe should be the most of your worries."

Kira had managed to get the mob under control, but his priorities now were obvious. He'd need to make sure that Rohan didn't say anything to Syo that Kira didn't hear himself. If they decided that he wasn't trustworthy, or was hiding something from them, it'd make things difficult.

Not to mention that his followers were starting to dissent. They were cowards that only had the courage to act on whoever was nearest. Murray's presence and Haiji's command was the only thing that kept them from lashing out at the nearest object.

Too frightened to fight the children above, but too paranoid to trust the children below.

Murray was right. Shinobu and Hayato Kawajiri weren't safe underground anymore. If the Future Foundation arrived and found out that Haiji Towa let a lynching happen under his watch, they'd do whatever it'd take to find him. He needed to be a perfect martyr for them.

He also knew how Rohan saw the family. Maybe the mangaka was growing old and decided he wanted a girlfriend, or was just sentimental, but he had some strange attachment to them. An attachment that Kira could use to his advantage.

Rohan wouldn't risk a fight with two non-Stand users so close.

"If you really don't want Hayato here," Kira spoke loudly, getting everyone's attention, before looking down at Hayato. "You and your mother will have to come with us."
"No! It's not safe out there for her!" Hayato cried, grabbing Shinobu's hand. It was enough to make her softly gasp.

"You think it's safe in here?" Kira then turned to the crowd who were so close to whining again. "If you don't want them to go, then you'll have to accept them being here. If that's the case," Killer Queen manifested behind him and he glared at them. The Stand couldn't be seen by the people, but they could feel the entire area drop in temperature. "They're welcome here."

Kira already knew their answer. They loved Haiji as the man who saved them and they respected him as a leader, but they were spineless wretches to the end. They wouldn't obey his commands unless Murray watched over all of them.

Syo and Rohan could see and sense the same thing. The only good thing about having these leeches was that they made for useful tools for the real dangers.

"Do you even know where to find Komaru?" At Syo's blank expression, he sighed. "In the future, remember that it's not just you two fighting against this threat." Kira often wondered if he was playing the leader, or the only person with a brain. "Toth said that they would be flying like a bullet around the city."

"The bullet-train?" Hayato asked.

"I don't think it'd be working, Hayato." Shinobu said warily.

"That may be your best chance." Murray added, slamming his fist against his chest. "Betting everything we have on the roulette wheel of fate. It's a part of life to be bold and risk it all!"

"If we secure a back-carriage, we can keep the two of you safe." Kira said. Shinobu still seemed unsure; somewhat reasonable considering what Kira was asking. "It's our only option." He added.

"Fine. You, the kid, and his grandma can come along." Syo said, rolling her eyes. Shinobu didn't seem happy about the insult, but Kira was relieved that he got the answer he was looking for. She leaned back and looked at Rohan. "Just don't complain if the Genocider Express is too bumpy for your drawing."

"I know how to write under pressure." Rohan snapped.

Kira held out his forearm. Heaven's Door revealed information, but Kira had noticed that the information available changed depending on the body part. Offering his head would risk revealing his true identity, and showing his hand might have revealed his fetish.

His forearm? There was no information about it that he needed to hide. He also kept a close eye on Rohan, knowing how fast his writing speed was. Any attempt to read rather than write would be noticed.

It was a war of information that Kira planned on winning.

Rohan did his job, however, and wrote down the sentence. He still gave Kira a suspicious look, as if to warn him that he'd be watching him. Fine. This wasn't the first time that Kira had been forced to think on his toes.
He picked up Shinobu into his arms and let her hold Hayato in hers. It didn't matter how much they weighed, although Kira was no body-builder and they were not light, as Heaven's Door would compensate for it with speed. He gave one final look back at the camp.

"We'll keep the base safe, Haiji." Hiroko said, giving him a rare serious look. It was a relief to have at least one person in the building using their heads, especially after the Oingo Boingo Brothers went back into hiding.

"You have nothing to worry about." Murray promised. To everyone else, he meant that the base would be secure, but Kira knew the real meaning.

Only there was more than just his immediate identity to worry about. The adults were getting worse in their despair. They were getting agitated being underground but lacked the means or will to change their situation. It was reaching the point where they were nothing more than walking corpses, waiting to die.

Kira needed at least some morale for the evacuation. If he didn't find an escape from this damn city soon, whether from lowering supplies or spirit or even the next attack, he'd be leading a motley crew of corpses.

How would he be able to hide himself then? Haiji Towa could disappear in a mass of hundreds, all trying to escape at the same time, and all under fire. He could go away and become a legend, while the man Yoshikage Kira would live a normal life.

Not in a measly flock of a few dozen.

After saving Komaru, Kira was beginning to wonder if it would be time to consider cutting his losses. Komaru would just have to choose between her hand and staying in this city; the Resistance needed to leave now. It was that or letting everyone sink into the abyss.

Kira would not let that happen. These people were meant to enable his escape from attention. They would escape this nightmare no matter what. Yoshikage Kira would have his old life back no matter what. Even if it meant killing everyone who got in his way.

Even if it meant killing Rohan Kishibe and Genocider Syo themselves.

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"Come on, guys. Don't do this kind of thing on a train." Kotoko wagged her finger at the three of them. "At least Big Sis is being motivated. What's your excuse?"

Komaru struggled against the bonds keeping her tied against the machine. She had to get out! We Built This City kept her safe from Kotoko's Stand, but it couldn't do anything against the hands that were...touching her all over. Even summoning the shield only had the entire machine covered up by the Stand.

The darkness only made the feelings worse. It was harder to move around and avoid the hands than it already was.
They were touching her all over, no matter how much she struggled, and now she was having to watch everyone else suffer the same. Fukawa, Rohan, Haiji, all of them had come to try and save her and now they were barely able to stand.

Little Girls had somehow managed to fire its dentures at Rohan, sinking into his torso. It wasn't like he was badly hurt by it, but he had started blushing, breathing heavily, and stumbled against the side of the carriage. Kotoko fired her strange gun at both Syo and Haiji, the narrow corridor making both easy targets. After that, it was just a matter of Little Girls firing its dentures at them again, having somehow regrown in its mouth.

Komaru was having to focus on resisting the feelings she was getting from this, but she could see that the teeth could fire off from the jaw. The gums that held the tooth shifted to a certain position before firing the tooth in mid-flight. Half of them hit Fukawa and the other half hit Haiji.

All of them were now stumbling on the floor. Komaru guessed that whatever those teeth were meant to do, it was somewhat related to what was happening to her. Toying with their bodies and making them feel all warm and weird so that they couldn't resist.

We Built This City could only cure her though, right? It couldn't do anything for the others.

"I can't believe you all had to interrupt Big Sis's punishment. You're all getting punished for this," Kotoko paused before pointing at each of them. "Ugly Big Sis, Artsy Big Bro, and Pervy Big Bro!" She cried out, probably having to take time to think of each nick-name.

Little Girls salivated as it laughed at Kotoko's jokes. Komaru had thought that Judas Priest was the ugliest Stand she had ever seen, but Little Girls had managed to prove her wrong. It looked like it had been stretched out, with a smile that showed dentures as big as her head, big hands that resembled the ones on this 'Motivation Machine', and the stripey sleeves that substituted its arms.

What was worse was its power. The way that it managed to bring Fukawa, Rohan, and Haiji all to their knees panting and sweating. All of their faces were blushing and it almost looked like they were restraining the urge to rub their legs against the soft carpet.

"You've...got those...pebbles, right?" Rohan huffed out as he leaned back against the left wall. He had the worst of it; getting the full dentures.

"No use...the texture's," Haiji's sharply inhaled his body crawled into itself further, squashing his hands-stuck in the pockets-between them. He stumbled towards Fukawa and almost landed on her. "Like knives on my skin."

"And I'm too far for Heaven's Door or Killer Queen. Don't try Sheer Heart Attack either, unless you want Big Sis to go boom." Kotoko said, before blowing a raspberry. "Sorry guys, but it's time for Big Sis to go crazy and get a kink."

Those words only made Komaru struggle before, trying her best to avoid the hands' grasp and touch. "No! I don't want th-Ah."

"Oi, a girl's first time ought to be more sacred than that." Fukawa said. She began to pull herself up from where she had been lying before and readied her scissors. "I'm not about to let Dekomaru's first time be to a high-tech dildo!"
It's not like that! Komaru protested. She'd have said something but that'd have only released the moan inside her. She couldn't handle this! For all of her struggles, the hands were still able to touch and grope her to their delight. We Built This City was barely keeping them away from her crotch. At least Kotoko and Little Girls were distracted by Fukawa's defiance.

"You wanna lose your mind, then fine!" Kotoko fired a set of teeth from her denture gun and Little Girls fired its own dentures from its gums.

The teeth detached from the dentures and flew like missiles in a cluster-bomb, but Fukawa was prepared. Her body contorted into a weird shape that nonetheless let her avoid Kotoko's dentures, which would have kept her stuck, and deflected the teeth with her blades. Most of them shattered to dust thanks to Smells Like Teenage Spirit.

Only a handful managed to pierce through Fukawa's skin. They fell off without a problem, but the blush on Syo's face grew darker and she was slowing down in approaching Kotoko.

"Little Girls does more than just you all hot. It makes you sensitive too." Kotoko said. Her voice was more subdued and the smile on her face was smaller. "The perfect Stand for dating. The brush of the air. The feel of your clothes. Just about everything has a slight touch, and now you feel it. All soft and gliding all over. It's enough to feel like you're being stroked all over."

"This...ain't..." Fukawa took a moment to close her eyes and groan. Kotoko used that moment to have Little Girls fire its newly-grown teeth at her. Most of them were deflected, but more than before managed to hit. Fukawa hissed and dropped the left scissor. "That's cold."

"Come on, smelly Big Sis. You can't be standing up for too long." Kotoko said, not even bothered by how close Fukawa was getting to her. It was as if she didn't feel in danger at all. "In just a little while, probably around the time for Big Sis too, you and Artsy Big Bro are gonna explode with pleasure! Your minds will be all gloopy."

"No one's...pimpin' us...while..." Fukawa was only six steps away. Then five. Then four. Only to then stumble and fall to the ground before Kotoko, unable to get herself up without moaning and falling back down.

Komaru tried to scream for Fukawa to get up, to try and fight this, but it only came out as a mewl. Haiji was trying to move forward without touching the carpet or walls but only stumbled further to the ground, his eyes intently on Fukawa, while Rohan crawled. Both men were groaning and trying to avoid movement as much as possible.

"See?" Kotoko beamed. Only her expression turned dark and her voice dropped. All humour left her. "This isn't my fault. Kids are supposed to act like adults at a younger and younger age, and I'm only copying what adults did to me." She crouched down before Fukawa and lifted her head up by the tongue. "Child porn's illegal and people still do it, so why not do adult porn?" She asked, eyeing Fukawa over. "I guess you're catering to someone's fetish."

Komaru couldn't fight the tears in her eyes. This was all her fault! If she didn't let herself get kidnapped then Fukawa wouldn't be in this mess right now.

"Fukawa..."

"Hey, Dekomaru? Guess what's the great thing about Smells Like Teenage Spirit" Fukawa said, as
best as she could when her tongue was being grabbed. Kotoko let go while Komaru made a 
confused noise, thanks to the machine she was strapped to. "It doesn't get hurt."

She threw the scissor in her hand up in the air, to the corner of the carriage away from Komaru, 
leaving her confused. Why had she done such a thing? It was only when Komaru noticed Haiji's 
stare staying with the scissor, and Killer Queen hiding right behind him with its hand at the ready, 
that Komaru understood.

The explosion rocked the room. It easily tore a hole in the bullet-train and blew Little Girls far away; 
its height working against it as it was just in range of Killer Queen's attack. Kotoko herself was 
blown back as well. Komaru's eyes widened as she realised what Fukawa had done. She had used 
her opponents own Stand to attack the user!

She's so smart. Komaru thought to herself. Fukawa was already finding her second-wind and rushed 
back to pick up the scissor she dropped. Kotoko was already trying to run when Fukawa threw the 
scissor-blade at her as if it were a kunai.

Komaru's blood turned cold. Fukawa wasn't going to kill Kotoko, was she? Not after what she had 
promised to Togami! Komaru doubled her struggle to escape the chains to remind Fukawa of this 
until she saw what her friend was really aiming at.

The scissor blades broke into two blades from the force of the throw. One hit the upper side and the 
other at the lower. The aim on both was so accurate and precise that not a single part of Kotoko's 
skin was cut by the blades. All it sliced was Kotoko's clothes.

The only problem was that Smells Like Teenage Spirit also seemed to work on inanimate objects as 
well.

A high-pitched scream echoed throughout the carriage, and probably the train itself, as Komaru 
quickly shut her eyes to avoid looking at Kotoko's naked body. The last thing she saw was Haiji and 
Rohan doing the same, only they blinded themselves by putting their hands over their eyes. 
Wounding Little Girls had apparently negated its spell.

The entire carriage shook for a moment as it sounded like the train was crashing into something. But 
that was ridiculous. How could the train be intact then? Still, it did loosen the chains she wore.

"Super-gross. Super-gross!" Kotoko howled, as she rushed to leave the carriage. It didn't sound like 
she was running the way the others came in. Was she heading to her base? "Even if I was over 
eighteen, this'd be weird."

A few seconds of silence took hold before Komaru could feel the chains, already slightly loose, 
come apart as Fukawa sliced them apart and got Komaru down. She opened her eyes to see Haiji 
and Rohan completely fine, if breathing heavily, and Fukawa herself right as rain.

"While I can't disagree with the results," Haiji said, only to scrunch up his face in disgust. "I'd rather 
not see that display again. It's bad enough knowing what sick perversions she saw to have that kind 
of Stand."

"A character almost too dark, if it wasn't for reality." Rohan added. He then glared at Haiji and then 
Fukawa. "How long was I going to be in the dark for?" He asked, probably not happy about being 
in the dark. Fukawa just shrugged her shoulders.
"What kind of author reveals the mystery immediately?" She replied, using a logic that Rohan couldn't counter. "Besides, I've been letting Dekomaru have all the big moments. Time for the heroine of this story to take back control."

Shinobu and Hayato were beginning to move into the room. Haiji moved to approach them when he saw Shinobu bleeding, but she assured him that it was only because she had covered Hayato when the train crashed. Komaru thought it was cute how Haiji and Shinobu were getting along.

But there were more important things at hand. Like hugging Fukawa as tightly as possible.

"I'm sorry, Fukawa!" Komaru knew she was probably hurting Fukawa's ears by shouting but she had to say it. Just thinking of how mean she had been was enough to make her cry. "I shouldn't have said you have no friends, or that you're some kind of chosen one who doesn't get weak people. I'm sorry I make you do all the work. I didn't think you'd come after our fight. Waaaa."

"Did that machine mess with you more than I thought? I'm flattered, but I ain't into this kind of route, Dekomaru. Though high-school girl's skin's always that nice kind of soft." Fukawa took a few sniffs of Komaru before grabbing her by the shoulders and turning her to face Rohan. "Oi, Rohan's an anti-social author type. Go date him."

What!? Date Rohan Kishibe? What was Fukawa thinking?

"I refuse." Rohan said, a bit too quickly.

"No. He's old." Komaru insisted.

The Kawajiris approached the rest of the group cautiously. They probably saw Fukawa like this for the first time on the train and might have had the wrong idea. Yes, she may have killed a few innocent people, but she was working to improve herself. No one died by her hand yet, so that was a start.

Though it might have helped that Fukawa sneezed at this point.

"Wh-What happened? Why am I all sweaty? Why are you all sweaty?" Fukawa sniffed and her eyes widened. She turned to Komaru with an expression she really didn't like the look of. "Should I be calling you Cumaru from now-"

Fukawa was cut off by her own screech. Said screech came from We Built This City grabbing both her cheeks to pinch and move around to keep her from finishing that sentence.

"That's not even clever, Fukawa!" Komaru scolded. She could be the worst sometimes.

"You're more perverted than I thought," Rohan said, scoffing at Fukawa and giving her a disdainful look. "I suppose that's what you get from someone who just writes Fifty Shades of Grey over and over again."

Fukawa's back straightened at that and she turned with an intention to make this a full-fledged argument. A battle of the authors! A battle ended before it began as Haiji stepped in and acted as a wall separating the two from one another.

"That'll have to come later." Haiji looked behind Komaru, making her turn to see the open hole ahead. He turned to the Kawajiris. "Stay close behind us. I'll protect you as best as I can, but this
fight may be troublesome." A look of stoic determination flashed in his eyes. "She won't get the drop on us again. Fukawa, I'll charge one of your scissors with Killer Queen. Komaru, you'll have to be in front. Her Stand won't affect you. Rohan, be ready to get the Kawajiris to safety if need be."

Everyone knew their role and accepted it. Rohan even wasn't glaring at Haiji when he thought that no one would noticed, or at least not as much. The enemy was in front of them and they couldn't let arguments get in the way again.

The gang was back together and were more than ready to bring the fight to the Warriors of Hope again. They weren't going to break up again. Just like how fire removed a metal's impurities, this trial had only made them stronger.

_This is it. We're not going to be pushed around by her._ Komaru put a hand to her back and readied her trusty Hacking Gun. She stood beside Fukawa, Rohan, and Haiji as their Stands were just as prepared as they were to show Kotoko just what they could do. _We're not gonna take it anymore._

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So Nagisa chose his little fantasy over Dio. Going so far as to beg these people to just leave.

"I knew you'd betray me, Nagisa," Monaca sighed and leaned onto her bed. Today was just exhausting and she needed a rest. "I always knew it'd be us two fighting for his heart."

At least Kotoko was useful in the end. She managed to keep Komaru from just going with any evacuation and managed to get the team back together. Monaca was so lucky that Kotoko was not only stupid enough to let Syo get so close, but also that whoever was impersonating her brother clearly didn't know his tastes.

_Is this how you felt, Dio? Surrounded by idiots and idealists who keep dragging you down?_ Monaca supposed that Dio's little buddy himself had merits. He was the one who let Monaca be the first to witness the return of Dio Brando. She'd be the one to greet him in the new world.

She gazed up at the pictures of her inspiration and smiled. If he was here, Dio would know where she was coming from. She was the only one of the others who really understood just what he was going for.

The guy whose dad beat him up, the kid with no friends, the girl who got pimped out, and even Nagisa, all four of them thought that Dio just wanted Heaven. That he wanted to give back to humanity.

No way! That was what some lame-o like Makoto Naegi would want. Dio wasn't about self-sacrifice. He was about living it up to the full and taking everything he wanted. Being in charge and having fun.

And, most importantly, being alive.

How could Dio be happy with just one city filled with brainwashed kids? He was a man who'd only be happy with the world itself under his boot. Monaca understood that, but Nagisa never could. All he wanted to be relied on by Dio, he just couldn't be what he needed to be.
That's why *She Sells Sanctuary* is way better than smelly old Nirvana. Monaca inwardly insisted with a pout. At least her Stand didn’t bait you into thinking there was something more to it.

She could trust that Servant would handle Nagisa. His Get Lucky would neutralise Nirvana, if it came to blows, but it wouldn’t. Murralsee was right when he said that Nagisa didn’t have the heart that Monaca did. Not to mention that Fukawa could be counted on to follow orders.

The only wild-cards here were the mangaka and the person pretending to be Haiji.

Honestly, this guy had never met her brother, did he? Where did he get this 'don't be trash', 'lead from the front' and 'be inspiring but practical' stuff from? Monaca didn't know, but all she knew was that she knew a few secrets about his guy and her now-deceased brother that would help her now.

That was who Monaca was. Humans weren't all that different from machines. Just find the right patterns and they functioned like a dream. Find a way to break up those patterns, and they twisted and turned until they had to be fixed. Whether to their original state of something new.

*Now it's your turn to be re-programmed, Mister Yoshikage Kira.* Monaca giggled to herself as she leapt from the bed and began to head back down the ladder. The Dio Room was always good for getting her head together. *You may fight, but once it becomes between your friends and your secrets, you'll pick the latter over them any day.*

Monaca would see Dio Brando again. And all attempts to stop her would come to nothing.

*It's useless.* She thought to herself. *Useless, useless, useless, useless, uselessuselessuselessuselessuselessuselessuselessuselessuselessuselessuseless.*

With that thought humming in her mind, she got back to work.

**Jataro Kemuri/Judas Priest: Retired**  
**Kotoko Utsugi/Little Girls: MIA**

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**Stand Stats**

**Little Girls**  
**User:** Kotoko Utsugi  
**Stats**  
Destructive Power: D  
Speed: C  
Range: B  
Durability: D  
Precision: B  
Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**  
Stand is capable of firing out its set of teeth, or individual teeth, that regrow rapidly. These teeth each contain a poison that increases the target's sensitivity to touch and increases both arousal and body
temperature when they pierce skin. Targets can only be poisoned to a certain limit, varying depending on willpower, after which point they hit 'Climax'. Targets then enter a state where touch sensitivity is hundred-fold and user lacks energy to even move for one hour.
She Sells Sanctuary

Chapter Notes

We're just one chapter away from the end of the DR:AE arc and from the reveal of Dio's Friend. I try to keep to a weekly schedule, but keep in mind that Christmas Eve is next week, so the next update will be around 27-9th December. Should be back on weekly schedules otherwise. Might see another Bonus Features after this Arc and either before or after the next Holy Diver IF chapter after this.

So yeah. Last chance to speculate who Dio's Friend is in the comments. If you've got any questions about the fic, in or out of the narrative, feel free to ask and I'll answer as best I can without spoiling. Think of it as a way to make up for the lack of an update next week.

Enjoy! Remember that feedback is always appreciated too.

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Nagisa Shingetsu shouldn't have been able to do this.

He was never physically active. His parents had preferred to emphasise the mental capacities of Talent and seeing how they developed in a child. Physical attributes were to come later around puberty. The real motive was likely to be when he no longer had the will to resist would they risk making him athletic.

Even if they had, there was no way that a child of eleven should have been able to defeat two grown adults, no matter their lack of physique. They weren't unhealthily inactive, but they were below the national average.

Only Nagisa knew that they could have easily held him down. They had done it before when he didn't want the IV and they should have been able to do it now. Dio's expectations for him were almost too high.

Nirvana wasn't meant to be a combat-Stand. All it did was supply Nagisa with information. Information that could be used for Dio's cause and to increase Nagisa's own knowledge. It seemed like a cruel joke, at the time.

He never told anyone about how disappointed he was with it. A mere thin metallic circlet that wrapped around his head, blue circular lights every thirty degrees, that had another wire coil down
and branch out into one of those scouters from Masaru's anime.

Nagisa hadn't been allowed to watch those kind of shows. His father didn't want him exposed to outside influences. He only knew it from the other Warriors of Hope. All it could do was give Nagisa the information he was supposed to understand. How could it have been able to make him truly useful? Dio shouldn't have expected anything of Nagisa; he'd have been thrown away like trash if it were anyone else.

But Dio believed in him! He saw something of value in someone like Nagisa. Soft words were whispered on how he'd help lead the others into Heaven if he just tried a bit harder. If he tried to put Nirvana to its very limits.

To see and learn about those under the eye of Nirvana might have been enough for others; but not for Dio. Nagisa had always thought of himself as a failed experiment that couldn't be what his creators wanted, but Dio changed that.

He was the Sage of the Warriors of Hope. He was the one who kept them focused and wary of their surroundings. He was the one who would protect them all from the Demons.

Monaca's smile burned into his back as he looked down on the brutalised sacks of meat before him. It was amazing how the Boss Demons all looked the same after their defeat. The only difference was Kotoko's and burns took the place of blood.

"I, Dio, knew that you had potential, Nagisa," Dio was crouched by his side and hummed appreciatively at the final gasps of Doctor Shingetsu. "But this? To think that a Stand could evolve the way that yours has. To have 'Acts'."

"How? How was I able to-"

"Because I willed it so." Dio turned and smiled at him. It was small and proud, like the ones Nagisa always wanted from his parents. His voice turned to a whisper. "You know that the others can be...distracted. They are loyal in their desire to see me bring Heaven, but they need someone to guide them. Someone with your abilities."

"I'll be it, Dio. I won't let you down. I'll be everything you need me to be." Nagisa had to keep the desperation out of his voice. The heavy breathing was more than enough to help.

Act 2 might have helped him kill his pare-Demons, they were Demons, but it was still a lot of work.

"I know you will, Nagisa. It's why I, Dio, expect nothing less from you. The new generation will need idols to look up to. There may be those who avoid the eyes of Heaven and still resist. It will fall to those like you and the Warriors of Hope to destroy them. To keep the Hope of the new world pure."

"I will. The Warriors of Hope will exterminate whoever you need us to. There won't be any Demons left when we're done with them." Nagisa said.

"Nirvana has potential. This is not the end of its abilities. Who knows? Maybe its peak will be lesser to only Holy Diver." Dio mused. Nagisa could barely contain himself. Almost as strong as Holy Diver?! That was impossible. Dio seemed to sense Nagisa doubt. "But that power, just like Heaven, can only be reached by those with the desire and self-belief to do so. You must become like me; able to believe that it is only natural that a Stand with such power is yours."
Nagisa nodded and Dio stood up to turn back to the others. They had mostly been happy to sit back and watch while Dio's Friend entertained them. The mask he wore during all this had been weird. Red cloth hid the lower half of his face and some kind of blacked-up set of goggles and head-gear for the upper-half.

Dio had insisted on keeping his friend's identity a secret, though, and even Nagisa was forbidden from using Nirvana Act 1 on him. Not that he'd ever need to enforce it. None of the Warriors of Hope would ever think of disobeying him.

Plus they got to see Pet Shop as a reward.

Nagisa looked back down on the bodies of his parents. He felt no guilt about this. The feeling inside him was merely that of anticipation for the world that was to come. The world where no child would fear Demons. A world filled with Hope. A world under Dio's rule.

He turned away from them without a second thought. The sight that greeted his eyes was none other than Monaca's smile. She was pretty, smart, and had a heart that seemed to have no end to it. The suffering she went through, enough that it left her crippled, didn't damage her smile.

Its strength was enough that it almost seemed to burn through Nagisa whenever Dio pulled him away for their private talks. It was mostly to discuss Nirvana and how to unlock its potential. Monaca was probably happy that Dio's cause could be helped further.

Dio, the Warriors of Hope, and children everywhere. Those were the three pillars for which Nagisa knew that his cause was righteous. The death-toll of Dio's actions meant nothing to him. It was the price to be paid for Heaven; a place where the sins of the past would be erased and Despair was no more.

Nagisa didn't care what it took. He would do anything to create the paradise that Dio envisioned for them. Make any sacrifice necessary and do whatever Dio asked of him. He wouldn't fail them like he failed his parents. He couldn't let his weakness destroy his worth to Dio.

He'd rather die than be useless.

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"What is this?" Kira asked. The photograph-the fucking photograph—was shaking with his hand. He could barely see the image clearly.

Why would he want to? Kira should never have tried to follow this 'Komaeda' or 'Servant' or whatever he called himself here. He should have just stayed with the group and not separated himself during the fight. Blissful ignorance would have been better than...this!

Society had laws of which all people must follow to live a peaceful life. Some of them were codified into laws such as banning murder, robbery, rape, and other acts that are labelled crimes. The punishment for which is to be either sent to jail or killed by the state, depending on where you are.

Other laws are unwritten and instead are determined by the society itself. Acts which offend
sensibilities and are frowned upon, enough for some to even physically engage in what are seen as 'crimes' themselves. Acts that defy the 'decency' of society, or particular pleasures that offend that 'decency'.

For those like Kira, he broke both laws in that he killed women and used their hands for his fetish. If it were for Fate siding with him and the power of his Stand, he'd have been in jail by now.

But this? This?! This disgusted even him. Not least because the sight of Haiji Towa masturbating was in itself offensive to his sensibilities, but also because of what he was pleasuring himself to.

It was hentai of some kind, but the cover showed girls far below the age of consent in a pose and state of clothing their parents likely had nightmares about. Kira didn't know what kind of porn it was and didn't care.

This was his body doing this. The body that Haiji's Stand cursed Yoshikage Kira with was tainted. There was proof that the heir to the President of the Towa Group was a pervert. Proof held by the enemy themselves.

In Servant's arms was a laptop showing the face of a young girl with green hair. She was smirking at him and leaning against a closed fist. She said that she was Monaca Towa; Head of the Robotics Division and little sister to Haiji Towa. If Kira chose to believe her.

"You know, big bro, you really should learn to hide your mags better. Or learn to hear better." Monaca's face went from a smirk to a false look of childish disgust. "To think your adorable little sister had to sit through all that. Eewww."

"Oh, are we still playing that game? I didn't think we had the time." Servant asked, looking down on the screen. Kira would have wanted nothing more than to destroy him with Killer Queen, but controlled himself.

"Fine. Ruin my fun." Monaca crossed her arms and adopted a fake-frowning face more designed to look 'cute' than angry. She sighed and returned to her normal smug expression. "I'm guessing you've learnt all the problems with being a leader too, haven't you, big bro?" The smile sharpened and her eyes held a sense of superiority. "Or should I say Yoshikage Kira; the Hime Hand Killer."

His eyes widened. They even knew his secret identity! Not only did they have proof that Haiji Towa was a lolicon, but also that he wasn't even Haiji Towa. How? Kira replayed the scene in his mind a thousand times. Neither Monaca nor Servant were there. Haiji was the only adult who noticed Kira and the Murralsee hadn't-

_Murray_. The blue Murralsee who had discovered him. The one who demanded that he help in establishing the Resistance. The one who was hiding a secret of his own; that he was working for the Warriors of Hope all along.

So that was how Kotoko knew about Sheer Heart Attack. That was how they found out about where the camp was. It was easy to know when you chose the location yourself. _I'll kill you. I'll destroy every last nut and bolt from you. Then I will erase these pieces of shit as well._

"You're thinking of killing us, right? Use Killer Queen on people like Servant and Murray and hope this all goes away? Come on, you're smarter than that." Monaca's smile and high-pitch dropped. There was nothing but a cold emerald ocean facing Kira. "If we die, certain people will know, and these pictures of Haiji go everywhere. Plus a rumour that Haiji Towa and Yoshikage Kira were allies
may leak out. That'd be pretty big. Even if you faked your death, people will look for you. A leader can be a fine martyr that no one tries to find. A lolicon? Oh no, those don't get to go away."

He'd be tracked down forever. No one would believe that he truly died in Towa City. People searching for links to Yoshikage Kira, people searching for Haiji Towa to punish him for his deeds, and even people trying to find him to find out if he was really dead. It'd be a matter of time before he'd be suspected of working with the Warriors of Hope as well.

Kira was trapped. He couldn't do anything but listen to their demands. The only consolation was that it'd only be for now.

"Don't be too sad. Our interests are still aligned," Monaca said. "We both want the adults to get off their butts and do something for themselves. We want to keep your identity a secret."

"The only problem is that a certain someone is approaching this whole thing wrong," The Servant added. "There's a way that these stories are meant to go. It doesn't make sense if the hero-to-be abandons the story three-quarters done."

"So that's why we need you. Mister Kira, I pinky-promise that your identity will remain hidden forever and ever, if you agree to do a few things for me." Monaca raised her right fist and only raised her pinky finger. Kira restrained a growl at her offer, especially when the joking mood dropped again. "The first is to not leave Towa City. You're needed here."

"The second is that Komaru Naegi has to stay as well." The Servant smiled at him as if he was asking Kira to pick up some coffee. Some brat just over half his age! "You'll get help with that. Fukawa will provide all the support you need."

"Serial Killer Club!" Monaca threw up her arms and cheered. A joyful cackle was soon replaced by a happy smile and dead eyes. "We mean it. Komaru Naegi must stay. She must reach her destination utterly and completely unharmed. The same goes for her friends. Kill whoever gets in the way of that."

Yoshikage Kira knew that his temper could flare. There were things he just couldn't stand. People who threw on mismatching socks, people who walked with wet stains on their clothes without caring about how it'd stain other people's clothes, the co-worker who could never meet deadlines. Small things that piled into something more.

Take this Servant, for example. The stains on his clothes, the giant mitten on his hand, and even the way that his hair looked like it hadn't been combed in years. All of that just stoked embers inside Kira.

It was nothing to the inferno raging inside of him. These little shits dared to blackmail him into being their errand boy. They spoke down to him like he was some dumb intern on his first day of the job. He could kill Nagito Komaeda right now. Killer Queen and Sheer Heart Attack together.

Only he didn't know who their connections were. Those pictures couldn't come out. It was too much of a risk.

*To have a normal life, I have to be these people's puppets. It wouldn't be forever. That was how Kira comforted himself. He'd let the two of them lull themselves into a false sense of security first. Just when they think they're safe. When I know how they could distribute these photographs. That's when I'll strike.*
Just like a predator moving slowly and carefully, ensuring that its prey was unaware of the trap being set for it, Kira would wait for his moment. He would be cautious and vicious at the same time.

"There's a third request too!" Monaca chirped. She fake-coughed and her Servant checked his pockets. Kira mentally made note of the two figures holding the laptop for him, likely his Stand, as Komaeda handed over a photo. "Kill the woman on this photo."

Kira looked down and his world shattered.

Hiroko Hagakure was in his room. She was looking in the drawer he had kept locked. She was looking at his nail collection. She was investigating his room.

Why? What made her suspicious of him? To go so far as to break a lock, likely with Smoke On The Water, and to track him down. It wouldn't be long before she asked questions. If she didn't know now, she'd figure it out quickly. The reason why Takaaki Ishimaru had to die.

*This is it. My life is ruined.* Kira's world was nothing. It was the end of all his hopes and efforts for over ten years. All he had done to have a normal life was for nothing. He almost drowned in his despair when Monaca's laugh kept him in the real world. It was deep, artificially so, as if trying to imitate a grown-man's chuckle.

"Is this what you become when nearing the pits of despair? When the pillars of your life come tumbling down? Then fine. Allow I, Monaca, to provide you with peace of mind." Monaca's smile was calm and superior. It made Kira want to beat it off her from rage alone. "Murray has kept her from revealing the truth. She's waiting for the others to get back."

So that was it. One of the people who Kira had helped reach safety had rewarded him with betrayal. Touko Fukawa or Rohan Kishibe. It had to be one of the two.

Kira would have to work fast. He'd need to get the Kawajiris out and then deal with Hiroko himself, then do the same with whoever had convinced her to do this.

"The Murralsee will give you an opportunity to move in. Just make sure you pick the right moment to strike." The Servant explained. At least Kira now had a window of opportunity.

"Heaven is coming, Kira, and you can enjoy the fruits of it as well. So long as you keep on playing this charade." Monaca laughed. It was an empty husk of it, but a laugh still. "It's funny. You actually thought that someone like Haiji could be like that. Some jerk of a brother who fantasised about little girls and whose father didn't even trust him with a department. Only spineless wretches would follow him." Monaca grimly smiled at him. "People like your followers."

He could take a guess at what she wanted from him. They wanted Kira to rally the adults to take action. Not to evacuate, but to fight as an army against the forces of the children and Murralsee. Whether they wanted to slaughter the adults in some elaborate ceremony, or something else, didn't matter.

All he needed to do was cut loose ends and get Komaru Naegi on that air-ship.

*Fine. This isn't the first time that I've had to eat dirt for the sake of a peaceful life. Simply play the passive actor. Simply go with their demands and follow their instructions.* Kira knew it was humiliating to even think about. He had something to keep his spirits up, however, as he frowned at
Komaeda. Their guard can't last forever. Brats like her let their guard down eventually. They'll pay for threatening my normal life.

"I really hope that we can be friends. At least until tomorrow." Monaca beamed at him. "After tomorrow, you can be whoever you want. Bye-bye!"

The laptop screen shut off. The distant sounds of battle with the Murralsee echoed over. Just when Kira thought he had found an escape out of this city, he was trapped in an even deeper hole. The Servant closed the screen and smiled at Kira.

"She's an intense young girl. Really see Lord Dio in her." Komaeda laughed. It was like hearing a broken car-engine, sputtering out air. "I wonder what role you'll play in this? Fukawa is the treacherous friend; Rohan the doomed mentor; and you as the mole. It's pretty funny, when you think about it."

"Get out of my sight." Killer Queen manifested behind Kira and moved towards Nagito Komaeda, Servant of the Warriors of Hope, who had the good sense to step back. "Unless you believe yourself to be of equal worth as me to your master."

"I'd never think such a thing." Komaeda insisted. Yet he remained still as he looked at Kira's Stand. The slave dared to look at Kira with pity and contempt. "Killer Queen and Sheer Heart Attack. Those Stands together could have defeated Dio and yet you did nothing."

"All I want is to live an ordinary life where I can express myself in peace. Nothing more, nothing less." Kira would destroy anything that got in the way of that.

"And you want to be normal. This must be how it felt for others to see me." The Servant grimaced. "Really weird."

Komaeda, with his Stand looking back at Killer Queen in case it tried anything, turned his back on Yoshikage Kira and walked out of the room. The sounds of battle outside were dimming down, giving Kira some quiet to organise his thoughts, but forced him to think fast.

It wouldn't be long before the others started looking for him. He'd need a plan. Was escape so unreasonable? Could he not try to take the same path as the Kawajiris?

This city was doomed anyway and he could fake his death on the road with Shinobu and Hayato. It was still a possibility. All he needed to do was eliminate the others and it'd simply be a story of how a group was wiped out.

No. Not if one of the others suspects me. No one would ask questions about people like Rohan or Fukawa, but Komaru Naegi was the Ultimate Hope's sister. The entire Future Foundation would come looking for her. Not to mention that Hiroko might know his secret. Once they learned that he had replaced Haiji, they would never stop looking for him. There can be no loose ends or mystery to this. Riding out this storm is my only option.

He would somehow convince Komaru to stay and fight for Towa City. He would somehow convince the adults to fight. Yoshikage Kira could do it. He had the power of Killer Queen, his own intelligence, and Fate itself had always blessed him in the long-run. All he had to do was to be practical about it.

Hiroko Hagakure would be dealt with soon enough.
"When do the helmets come off?" Hayato didn't look away from Nagisa's glare.

He kept quiet this whole time. Nagisa made his offer—even having some of his brainwashed minions bring in a box filled with Rohan's work that he left in his room—for them all to leave and Hayato didn't say a word. It wasn't a bad offer.

Hayato and his mother wouldn't be accepted by the adults and the kids and Murralsees would hunt both of them down. It was better to get out now and be safe. The only issue was that it extended to Komaru and Rohan too.

Haiji said he wouldn't take it up, but Hayato didn't trust him. His mother was smitten and believed the excuses on checking the tunnels to ensure there wasn't a trap. Hayato thought he just found a new escape route.

Only, he didn't entirely believe that anymore. Something changed about Haiji's posture after one of the fights. Maybe he saw another pile of bodies, or realised how desperate Nagisa was, but there was a reluctance about him now. As if he genuinely feared Komaru going down that tunnel.

Whatever it was, Hayato didn't trust the man who his mother called a hero. The only good thing about this whole thing was that they'd get away from him. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut.

But he just couldn't! Not after hearing all this crap from Nagisa about 'Heaven' and 'paradise for children'! The Warriors of Hope were victims of cruel adults, so they were going to make victims of every child.

How would this society work? Who would keep the city functioning? What about food, water, electricity, and keeping the city safe from outsiders? Nagisa just said that the Murralsee would handle the grunt-work. The machines of death would bring life?

What about the children too young for the helmets? Who had taken care of them all this time?

It was one final word, just as they were approaching the shrine, which made Hayato say the words on the tip of his tongue. The claim that the children would be free and happy.

*Who would be happy in this city now?* Hayato thought to himself. *Every memory has been stained by blood. Every family has been destroyed. You haven't created Heaven; you've created Hell.*

Hayato didn't back down to Nagisa's glare. "You heard me," He growled out. "When do the helmets come off? Those helmets that you're using on the kids. The ones that make them kill the adults."

"The helmets are doing this?" Komaru asked, gasping out her words. "That sounds like something out of sci-fi."

"It makes sense. I was wondering what could have driven those kids mad. Brainwashing's more developed than you think." Fukawa muttered. She moved a hand up to bite her nails.

"They're a temporary measure. Heaven is worth any sacrifice." Nagisa said. His eyes didn't meet
"Is that what you're gonna tell them?" Hayato heard his mother gasp. She was obviously afraid of what Nagisa might do, if upset too far, but also didn't want to restrain Hayato. It'd probably upset Nagisa even more. "When they wake up and realise that their parents were murdered. That you made them laugh and play in a river of blood? You think they're going to see you as a saviour? Or are the helmets gonna be kept on until they stop seeing demons?"

Nagisa's eyes flared with anger. The only thing keeping him from attacking Hayato was the fact that he had four Stand users all willing to take him down if he tried something. Fukawa and Haiji already didn't trust him, after the Murralsee kept trying to attack him, and they were ready for anything.

The Warrior of Hope balled his fists and was piercing Hayato's gut with his eyes. It seemed like he was ready to explode for the first time since this entire trip, leaning in close to Hayato, only stopping when the others tensed up.

"Get out of our city." Nagisa turned his back to Hayato and began walking up the shrine stairs.

"Hayato," His mother was already turning him around and hugging him tightly. "You shouldn't have done that. Who knows what he might have done?"

Memories of Mister Fujisaki warning him to avoid the Murralsee came rushing back to Hayato. No one told him how he had died, but Hayato guessed it was by the same way that everyone else died. The Murralsee got to him.

He wasn't going to let that happen to his mother. He had to be the protector of the family now that his father was...gone.

"Don't worry, we'll be fine." Hayato said, both to his mother and to himself. "Nothing's going to hurt you."

"I'll make sure of it." Haiji said. That was enough for Hayato's mother, gazing up at him with adoration in her eyes.

I'll keep her safe. Hayato told himself, as everyone began to slowly follow Nagisa up the stairs. Especially from you, Haiji Towa.

For the rest of the city, he'd just have to believe in Komaru, Fukawa, and Rohan. Hope that Komaru and Rohan wouldn't follow them and leave Fukawa alone with Haiji. If they did, Hayato had a sinking feeling.

As if that decision would doom all of Towa City. If not the world itself.

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Rohan knew Fukawa was hiding something.

That white-haired diabolus ex machina hadn't been expected. Rohan himself had been wondering if he could really leave Towa City to its fate. Komaru had been disappointing in that she simply did
what Fukawa gave permission for, but was he any better?

Was simply leaving Towa City to its fate truly the best option? Could Rohan really judge Komaru if he was doing the same thing?

In some ways, this Nagito Komaeda had saved him the trouble of answering these questions. There was nothing more that seemed to please this person other than seeing Komaru succeed. That should have made him at least a nominal ally.

Yet everything about him was wrong. It might have been hypocritical of Rohan to say so. He himself indulged in writing off the masses as simply part of the background for more interesting figures. The main characters. He even tried to push others into being more like the people he felt were needed.

What he didn't do was bow down to a megalomaniac dictator and burn the world for utopia. Komaeda was one of those Remnants of Despair that Komaru's brother was talking about. The lost followers of Dio Brando that served his every whim.

He was sincere when he spoke of his desire for Hope to spread across the globe. But it wasn't hope! He wanted to force Komaru into a fate that suited his desires. The chance for someone else to fight against Despair after he had given up.

Komaeda was a leech. A leech that was trying to change the blood-type of the very person he was feasting on. There was no way that Rohan could allow him to have his own way.

The fact that he had Togami to hold over Fukawa might have made her a liability. Someone for Rohan to fight against alongside Komaru while Komaeda could just watch and entertain himself. Her act might have worked if it wasn't for one thing.

Rohan wasn't an over-emotional idiot like Komaru.

The tears that ran down her face was the regret of a traitor forced into their circumstances. Komaru couldn't see past her own heartbreak and betrayal for her best friend turning her back on her. Emotions clouded her judgement.

For Rohan Kishibe, who saw Touko Fukawa as nothing more than a stuck-up hack author, her true feelings were laid bare. It would have been easy for Rohan to use Heaven's Door and make her tell the truth.

That was when Komaeda stepped in.

"I'm sorry, Rohan. You can't be allowed to interfere in this." Komaeda said, as Fukawa became Syo, placing himself between Rohan and the two girls. "If Fukawa is made to let you and Komaru pass, then all this Despair would have been for nothing. Hope will die out in Towa City. We can't let Dio win, can we?"

"You let Dio win when you became his minion." Rohan replied, getting his pen ready. "I didn't spend the last few decades honing my craft as a writer and artist, to become some piece on a cosmic game-board. You're simply an inconsistent side-villain who's come too late into the plot to be anything worthwhile."

Komaeda laughed at that, scratching the back of his head, and smiling happily with shut eyes. "Hearing this from the Ultimate Mangaka would be just deserts for trash like me." The good mood
dropped then. His voice lowered and his expression was one of contempt. "But you're not the Ultimate Mangaka. You're an average mangaka with an unattractive sense of superiority. It really is pitiful when the normal people try to act like they're deserving of Ultimate status."

*His eyes are shut.* Rohan cursed under his breath. Komaeda must have had footage of all their battles with the Murralsee and Warriors of Hope. He knew exactly how their Stands worked and had adapted. *Closing the eyes. Simple but effective. It's just too bad I know how to counter that one.*

It was easier said than done. Komaeda could play up the inferiority-superiority complex all he liked, this guy was smart. He didn't rise to any of Rohan's taunts and restricted his attacks only to keeping Rohan from involving himself in the fight between Komaru and Syo.

Get Lucky was proving difficult as well. Rohan quickly figured out how it worked; one of its bodies filled up when good luck happened and another filled up when bad luck happened. Once a body was full, they exploded and either a 'Miracle' or a 'Tragedy' happened.

But this was the Ultimate Luckster. Talent was something that only this world seemed to have turned into an upper-case idea. Fukawa could churn out a book within a day, if she felt like it, and Komaeda could enjoy very good luck.

All of his 'bad luck' was just small and minor things to him and curses to others around him. It wasn't just his luck that Get Lucky was feeding on either, but the battle between the girls beside them. Rohan wasn't being held back by Komaeda's stubbornness but by the will of his comrades!

"This is why you let Shingetsu send Haiji below, isn't it?" Rohan asked. Komaru was managing to hold her own against Syo, but she'd need all the help she could get. He had to end this fight quickly. "You got scared about the odds and let him guard the Kawajiris. You can't fight Killer Queen and Sheer Heart Attack with yours eyes shut."

"You're smart for an average person," Komaeda replied. A soft smile was on his face despite the pen-scratch cutting from his right cheek to just under the eyelid. "This is a matter for friends to discuss. A mentor figure like you really shouldn't get involved. Although, now that I think about it, the death of a mentor figure is a great way to inspire the hero."

"I'm not a fan of Death of the Author." Rohan refused to die now. Certainly not to some character that the heroes nor the mentor had ever seen before.

But he was stuck with a problem. How did you go about defeating someone who could command luck itself? Not exactly command, but utilise it for their own benefit. It wasn't even simply random occurrences that fuelled Get Lucky, but simply actions with positive or negative consequences.

*Wait.* Rohan had a shock of inspiration the likes of which he hadn't felt in a while. This was a new tier of inspiration. He hadn't felt this since Morioh Town! *It's not about Luck. It's about consequences and perception.*

Rohan didn't need to try and find a way around luck, but he simply needed to have faith that a Tragedy would occur. Not just any Tragedy, but a Tragedy that only applied to Komaeda.

It was a long-shot. It might be that the Tragedy would strike Syo or Komaru, or even the Kawajiris underground, yet it was the only shot he had. The Miracle was almost completely full. There would be no other way for Rohan to defeat him if he let that happen.
So, Rohan took a step forward, pulled back his arm, and ran towards Komaru.

"Rohan-sensei, what are you-Gah!" Komaru yelped as Rohan shoved her forward. Straight towards Syo, in fact.

"What the hell are you doing?" Syo howled as she slashed at Komaru.

To Komaru, it looked like she barely managed to dodge out of the way in time, as We Built This City burst out and formed its shield over Komaru just where the scissor was about to cut cloth. Smells Like Teenage Spirit didn't even land a single scratch on the powerful metal.

Syo gave Rohan the dirtiest look he had seen in a while, but he ignored it. It was necessary for bringing Komaeda down. Besides, it helped with Syo's cover; she was letting Komaru get too many hits in for it to be real.

Komaeda hadn't noticed a thing. All he guessed was that Rohan and Komaru were having terrible coordination like a couple of average people would. His own contempt for the non-Ultimates was working against him.

Rohan then found a way to fight. Little accidents and having the two battles intercept created a chance for Get Lucky to have its Tragedy side fill up. Komaeda must have noticed that Syo was being light on Komaru.

Komaeda was probably thinking of his luck. Rohan and Komaru were sabotaging each other and made it easier for Syo to try and break Komaru's spirit and make her turn her back on escape. It was like searching for treasure and tripping on a bottle containing the map itself.

The Tragedy side of Get Lucky was full. The black figure shook and stirred in place and was just about ready to burst itself. Unleashing the Tragedy that would change the course of both battles.

That was just was Rohan needed.

Komaeda was happily smiling, thinking that he was in control even when blind, when Rohan readied his pen and stabbed himself in the left index finger. He didn't need it to write, so it was no big sacrifice.

What was a sacrifice was his scream. It was a pain-filled one as he tried to make the tip of his pen touch bone and nerve endings.

"Rohan-sensei!" Komaru howled out in horror. Rohan sounded like he had less stabbed a finger and more shattered a kneecap.

Get Lucky's Tragedy-side first had its silver robotic head swell like a balloon before the weight fell to its stomach, then its arms, then its legs, before its whole body expanded to about double its size. That was when it burst out in the strangest explosion Rohan had ever seen.

No sound. No light. Simply a being that was no longer there.

Komaeda opened his eyes and looked confused for a brief moment. He probably expected that Rohan's accident was meant to have been the Miracle he desired. The one-in-a-million chance that would end the fight in his victory, without even opening his eyes.
Instead, Nagito Komaeda had just admitted defeat.

Rohan ripped the pen out from his hand and began to write out the design for Pink Dark Boy. The character that made him the world-famous mangaka in two worlds. The representation of his fighting-spirit. The shape of the Stand that had stayed by him even after the end of two worlds.

His own body seemed to align itself with the mind. The blood that sprayed out from his hand served as ink itself, forming the shape of Heaven's Door before Rohan was even finished sketching out the design in his head, and a red outline gave way to the white and gold Stand. There was barely any time to react.

Komaeda had been busy looking at Get Lucky-realising that the wrong half had gone away-and turned back with wide eyes to see a design of Heaven's Door. This was it! The ending moment of their battle!

Once you saw the design of Rohan Kishibe's manga, even if you closed your eyes after seeing it, you couldn't fight against Heaven's Door. Your entire body became a stack of papers that he could read with ease.

How ironic it was that someone who considered himself, along with all non-Ultimates, to be trash and called himself Servant to the Warriors of Hope could be so arrogant. How someone who believed in the grand cosmic idea of karma cycling through itself would assume he could avoid it.

Rohan loved nothing more than taking people like that and denying them what they wanted. Nagito Komaeda wanted to turn Komaru Naegi into some tool for which he could make others Hope. Make her a propaganda tool in a war against a corpse and its declining followers.

He had lent aid to the deaths of thousands of innocents and happily stood by for someone else to be the hero. Rohan couldn't deny it. He had spent so many years crafting dangerous yet pathetic villains who the readers could yearn to see defeated. Yet he still lagged behind reality, if it could create someone like Komaeda.

There was only one punishment suited for him. Komaeda's face peeled open into pages, the son of a bitch smiling and laughing like it was a game, as Heaven's Door cast down its judgement. It came as two simple sentences.

I cannot do harm to Rohan Kishibe, Touko Fukawa, or Komaru Naegi.

I cannot feel Hope.

This monster wanted to set up some cosmic wheel which everyone was forced to dance around? Then let him feel exactly what people like Rohan and Komaru did when forced into these plays. Let him see himself was the slave to Dio that he truly was; rather than some kind of secret saboteur.

The air stopped. It didn't grow cold or tense, but simply stopped. As if time itself was trying to understand just what it was that had just happened. Syo and Komaru had stopped fighting themselves, Komaru having gained the upper-hand with We Built This City keeping Smells Like Teenage Spirit from doing anything, to see what Rohan had just done.

Komaeda didn't move. Rohan couldn't move himself. How could anyone move?

There was just something about gazing into the abyss of Despair that made movement impossible.
The Ultimate Luckster had lost every ounce of happiness and mockery within him. What was left was a shaking shell of a man who threw his hands against his face to try and tear out the pages. Rohan used Heaven's Door to throw the pages back into Komaeda's face, sealing them in until Rohan decided otherwise.

It didn't stop Komaeda from hyperventilating and bringing his fingers to his face.

"W-Wha-Wh-No-Nonononononono-Bringitback-Bringitback-Bring the Hope back!" Komaeda screamed. His eyes were a vortex of horror, sorrow, fury, heart-break, just about every negative emotion under the sun. "Yoshi, Mother, Father, everyone, Chiaki, Miss Yukizome, we all fell-we let Dio-I fell into-Dio-he f-I-I-I'm going to die."

His pupils had become mere dots, his fingers were trapped against his face, and his mouth was just slightly open. A few whimpers came out, his mouth widened, and then it happened.

The loudest, emptiest, most horrified scream that Rohan Kishibe had ever heard.

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Nagito Komaeda had won the battle. Well, technically it was a loss seeing as Rohan defeated him, but that wasn't the goal of Komaeda's actions.

"That was a close one."

Nagito Komaeda laid in an ever-growing pool of his own blood, spurting from his legs, barely kept together, and looked up at the sky. Every part of Towa City was drowning in Despair; even the skies above. The blood of the innocents below had managed to reach into the clouds above.

It'd take a miracle to heal this kind of damage. The same type of miracle that saw the last beacons of hope for the old world rise up and strike down Dio Brando from his throne. The same type of miracle that carried underdogs through impossible odds.

The miracle of Komaru Naegi deciding to turn back and fight despite being insignificant and weak.

"It didn't go entirely to plan, but it's still hope." Komaeda said to himself. That was all he could ask for.

To think that Syo's fondness for Komaru would extend so far that she'd actually refuse to kill him by her words alone. It might have been a great source of Hope, if it weren't for the fact that it left him alive to report this to Monaca. Now the Warriors of Hope would know everything.

Warrior of Hope, more likely. Every single one of Monaca's friends had been turned into nothing more than a stepping stone for Komaru to go from an average piece of trash to a beacon of hope. It was really cold-blooded of her.

Probably shouldn't have said that. Komaeda thought to himself, as his legs stung at the memory of the word 'blood'. His Luck would protect him from bleeding out, Get Lucky was already filling up on a Miracle, but it didn't mean it didn't hurt.
Smells Like Teenage Spirit truly was a terrifying Stand. Nothing less for an Ultimate. Had Genocider Syo managed to strike Dio's neck or head, in that final battle, she might have been able to chop it off before Holy Diver could even act. Then who'd be the Ultimate Hope?

Komaeda probably should have taken the fight more seriously. It was bad luck that Yoshikage Kira had been busy escorting the Kawajiris, who were pushing the box holding Rohan's manga, across the tunnel, while Komaru and Fukawa fought it out. It meant that Rohan lacked an opponent.

It wasn't as if Komaeda could just let him interfere. He'd have used Heaven's Door to force Syo to back down and Komaru could have just fled into the tunnel with him. It was dark enough that few could see where they were going other than forward. Kira might have turned around to see Rohan use Heaven's Door on him too.

Mutual suspicion could be poison for hope.

Still, Komaeda had never been gladder to be away from Rohan. It just felt unnatural that such a talented mangaka could exist without being an Ultimate. It implied that Hope's Peak made mistakes. Mistakes implied that they were fallible. Fallibility meant being just above-average.

*Then again, that's why it was destroyed. The school where I first met my friends and had purpose. All turned to dust because of Dio's Despair.* Komaeda repressed a shudder. There were times where he wished he could have killed Dio himself for his crimes against Hope.

But there were also times where he wanted to fall to his knees and worship Dio. The man who forced the world to create the Ultimate Hope in Makoto Naegi. There wasn't a Despair stronger than Dio's and there was no Hope stronger than Naegi's.

To have been affected by Livin' On A Prayer would have been a dream come true. Maybe it'd actually come true for Komaeda! The bad luck he had with Rohan meant that he was in for some kind of miracle.

Normally, he'd be glad that he didn't lose any of his legs—despite the cuts being really deep—but he needed something more.

Rohan Kishibe tried to take away Hope from Komaeda. If it hadn't been for Get Lucky, that command would have been inscribed into Komaeda for the rest of his days, and he'd live a life of eternal despair.

If it hadn't been for Get Lucky creating a Miracle; Komaeda might have been cursed to live in eternal Despair. Never able to feel Hope again. That would have been a fate worse than death.

Komaeda stroked the stubs on his face where his nails had dug into the skin to wrench out the papers. That Miracle was the only reason that his face wasn't bleeding out as well as his legs. He sure was lucky to have had that Stand.

The mangaka obviously hadn't expected Komaeda to be so determined to reach those pages, or ripping them out himself. What was a birthday compared to Hope? What was the name of his parents compared to Hope? That was what it meant to truly be an enemy of Dio; to sacrifice everything to destroy his works.

It still sent a chill up Komaeda's spine. Nothing could have been worse that a life without Hope.
His skull began to ache. It was probably a reaction to the blood-loss. Komaeda put a hand to it and held his head steady. It was coming down from the front of his skull where Rohan had written in his commands. Maybe Komaeda was going through Hope Withdrawal?

He'd have to have faith in Komaru Naegi. If she didn't get to that air-ship and defeat Monaca, Komaeda might have to find a new source of Hope to draw on, and that'd be difficult while still being Servant.

_Ah, Hope really is a wonderful thing._ Komaeda had moments of doubt in the past. When he was a child, it had been when he lost his dear pet, and then his parents shortly after. How could he have ever escaped the despair that tied him down and threatened to swallow him whole?

The kidnappings, the diagnosis, the suffering of those around him. It had been horrifying for a child to witness. Why, if it wasn't for Komaeda's discovery of Hope, he'd have killed himself.

But that was when he realised the basic truth. For all of the tragedies in his life, Komaeda had been blessed with miracles as well. His dog died in place of him. His parents died and he became rich. The lack of loved ones meant the kidnapper let him free.

Komaeda wasn't cursed; he was lucky.

Good luck and bad luck. Hope and Despair. The eternal cycle that defined everything. Komaeda had almost lost faith with Dio's Mutual Killing Game. Even Ultimates couldn't stand up to Holy Diver's raw power. It seemed like Hope was doomed.

_But it wasn't. Hope won. It won by a miracle._ The victims of Dio's past and present actions had come together to bind him down for Makoto Naegi to deliver the final blow. An Ultimate Hope destroyed an Ultimate Despair.

Komaeda's left hand twitched. It never liked it when he remembered the death of Dio. It was natural for such an egotistical maniac to resent the memory of his crushing defeat.

The pain that shocked through his entire left arm was nothing compared to the Hope he experienced.

Next to him, filled with white light, Miracle exploded. Komaeda closed his eyes and laughed to himself. He wondered what sort of good fortune would befall him that could match the bleeding in his legs and the fate he almost suffered.

It was when the wind around him began to rush away from him, as another gust pushed down on him, causing his head to hurt even more, that Komaeda realised that he had forgotten about a certain someone. A certain someone who didn't react well to being told what to do.

Maybe he shouldn't be so negative. He doubted that Nagisa Shingetsu would let him bleed to death. Not here, at least.

_What was that phrase that Dio liked to say?_ Komaeda wondered, staring at the giant robot behind a very vengeful-looking Shingetsu, before the answer came to him. _This is the final round._

Hope against Despair. Which would triumph? Not that it should be of any relevance to someone like Shingetsu.
Pawns weren't to be concerned with the bigger struggle.

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"You know I never expected anything from you, right?" Monaca asked. She wheeled in closer to Nagisa. "That's what you've always known. Your parents, Dio, and now me. We say we expect things from you, but we know you'll never deliver."

"Shut up!" Nagisa howled throwing a fist at Monaca. Nirvana Act 2 fed into his strength.

Or rather it should have. An invisible force caught Nagisa's fist, throwing him back.

"See? What would Dio have wanted with a brat who screams and tries to hit girls his age when he realises the truth?" Monaca tilted her head and moved closer, making Nagisa stumble back. "Shingetsu can't do anything on his own. He has to be told what to do. But Dio never liked those people. It's why Monaca was his favourite. Why I'm your favourite. Even though you're so useless."

"Shut up!" Nagisa tried a punch with his other arm and Monaca's Stand stopped him, holding his arm in place.

"Useless." Monaca drew closer.

"Shut up!" Nagisa tried the other arm and was caught again.

"Useless." Monaca said, looking at how Nagisa struggled and wailed like a trapped animal.

"Shut up!" Nagisa tried to kick Monaca's chair. Her Stand was quicker, throwing Nagisa's arms down and taking his body with it.

"Useless." Monaca looked down at Nagisa, broken and weeping on the floor, and seemed to consider breaking the illusion of her disability to step on his head to keep him down. Instead, she had her Stand do it for her, its foot likely pressing down on Nagisa's neck. "This is where you belong."

Vizier Murralsee watched this battle of wills, or more Monaca asserting hers over Nagisa, with the beaten Servant besides him. Dio restrained the urge to finish Nagisa's work in that regard. There was the risk that Komaeda could use Get Lucky to defend himself.

Instead, he contented himself with watching the results of this fight for supremacy. It had been won long before Nagisa realised he was fighting it. Monaca's jealousy was always one-sided, but Dio let it burn anyway. Monaca could only grow stronger from a hunger for more.

Nagisa, on the other hand, had failed. Dio had long-since realised that he would not be what Dio needed him to be. The boy was unable to break his reliance on the expectations of others, in the end.

_Nirvana's strength comes from the will of a broken boy._ It was the curse of this body that prevented the Vizier from seeing Monaca's Stand in action. Memories of the original Dio were all he had to use to understand what was happening. For Dio, it was enough. The power of _She Sells Sanctuary._ To utterly deconstruct someone and turn them into nothing more than a machine.
The skeletal-looking Stand, easily double Monaca's height when fully formed, was one of the stronger Stands that Dio had ever seen. Not least because Monaca actually tried to use it to its full potential. It was greater than Kazuichi’s Welcome To The Machine; perfectly fitting for a Warrior of Hope to surpass an Ultimate Despair.

Those who became a part of Dio's will by the use of their own free will and attaining peace of mind. Not like the slaves who had to be moulded into extensions of Dio's will. Ultimate Despair did have their benefits, however, one of which being that they were less mentally fragile.

"They're only children. They can't be who you want them to be. Not until we start Heaven." His Friend's voice echoed through Dio's mind.

"It appears you were right. I, Dio, may have overestimated them." He thought to himself. Monaca was still standing. The last Warrior of Hope to have kept peace of mind and now she had taken her place as the master of her group. It brought an inner smile to the Vizier. But they will be enough.

There were few pleasures on this air-ship. He couldn't torture and break Byakuya Togami-his being intact was essential for the plan-so he had to amuse himself by watching the wretch's drugged state. That, and seeing Monaca Towa evolve into a true apprentice of Dio Brando.

Nagisa's head was being lifted by what Dio presumed to be She Sells Sanctuary. Monaca held his head in her hands and pressed her lips against his. Dio restrained a chuckle at the sight of her manipulations. It was like looking into a distorted reflection of himself.

"It's okay, Shingetsu. I love the you that's nothing more than a useless pathetic failure. The one who is nothing more than a pawn who needs commands." Monaca moved to hug Nagisa closely to herself. "So no more of this 'thinking for myself' and 'initiative' thing, okay? That's for Monaca and Dio. You can just do what you're told."

"Y-Yes." Nagisa's eyes were dull. It seemed that She Sells Sanctuary had did its work after all.

"Great!" Monaca cheered. She kissed him on the cheek. "Now how about you go to where I tell you and make sure that you do as I tell you to."

"Yes." Nagisa replied. His voice was like his mind; completely broken and subjugated to Monaca's will. Just as Dio himself had done to so many.

"Who knows? Maybe Monaca will give you cookies, or a kiss," Monaca slithered closer, her lips almost touching Nagisa's ears "Or something like the magazines you like to hide."

The Vizier's body stilled. Komaeda made a slight hum. How could he be so calm? Dio was normally immune to the horror caused by breaking social taboos-but even that one had caught him off-guard.

Had Monaca observed Dio using such tactics and rewards for the followers that attracted his eye? The reflection was staring back at Dio with eyes he almost didn't recognise.

"Like a queen and a servant, Shingetsu. The servant should obey the queen and find happiness in their natural place. The queen should have her servants obey commands and do her work and she'll be happy." Monaca pushed back on her wheelchair and rested her head on her hand, supported by her leaning an elbow on the wheelchair. "That's where your Hope, your peace of mind, lies. In ensuring that Dio's return is assured. Then Heaven. Say it back to me."
"Dio first. Then Heaven." Nagisa said. He was more machine than human now, awaiting commands to be inputted.

"Good." Monaca turned her back on him and wheeled towards Komaeda and the Vizier. "Now leave us."

Dio could not help but be reminded of himself when looking at Monaca. She had clearly been practising her poses and mannerisms to try and perfect her impression of him. The passive yet power-filled look in her eyes, the soft smirk on her face, and the calm yet domineering presence she emitted.

He wondered if this was how he looked to his Friend.

It was not just physical mannerisms. Her actions matched Dio's as well. To use everything and everyone around her to gain her heart's desire. To pay whatever price needed. To see Dio Brando again and rule by his side, even at the cost of the Warriors of Hope.

The strongest will survive. The Vizier realised that Dio's Friend would be upset with this. Monaca wasn't supposed to be doing this, and especially not to this extent. He will understand when Dio has returned. All sins will turn to zero in Heaven.

"What should we do about the news on the two intruders?" Servant asked. "We can have the Murralsee destroy them."

"No." The Vizier hissed. Monaca turned to him and titled her head in confusion. For good reason. He rarely interjected in this meetings with such force. "They are likely fellow followers of Dio. We shall welcome them with open arms. It is the will of Dio."

Dio knew who these people were. One was his Friend and the other was Izuru Kamukura. The latter was an unwelcome presence for this glorious day that would soon go down in history. The former, however, was necessary for this. His presence had defined the history of humanity and today would be no exception.

It will be good to see him again. Perhaps he'll bring Pet Shop with him. Dio mused to himself. Just as his friend was essential for the plan, he was also good for pleasure as well. It had been so long since Dio had spoken with him, and had enjoyed seeing his pet again.

Pet Shop was also more than a pet. He was the only reason that this plan was happening at all.

"If you say so, Vizier." Monaca replied. She wheeled in closer to the Vizier, but her eyes did not meet his. They were focused on his chest. "We'll be together again, Dio. You and me, just as it was always supposed to be. Before the others got involved."

The obsession with him risked ruining everything. Dio was Monaca's entire world. He defined who she was and what she did. Yet she did not take rivals well. Nagisa had his spirit broken because he loved Monaca more than he loved his position. Would Dio's Friend hesitate to hurt a child, if Monaca tried something on him?

No. She wouldn't. Monaca had to know that Dio would not react well if she had tried to attack his friend. The Vizier had no need to worry about Monaca taking things too far. He could simply sit and watch in approval as she worked in his name.

Monaca reverently put a hand over the sealed chest. If she tried, she could wrench the front-plating
open and see just what it was that she saw when looking at the chest. But she wouldn’t.

Dio’s head—or what remained of it—needed protection more than it needed adulation.

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"Shit." Hiroko said to herself. The Murralsee in front of her exploded as Smoke On The Water wafted out from its remains. "Where the hell are they?" She asked herself, as if it'd make them come back faster.

It had been five minutes and the Murralsee were already running rampant across the entire base. Containers were aflame, make-shift homes were being torn down, and blood and guts were being thrown about like water-balloons in the summer.

She and Murray did the best they could, but all that amounted to was getting everyone to hide in the only fortified place left—the council building—and saving whoever they could on the outside. It was all they could do. Murray had run out of ammo and Hiroko was just one woman.

This attack hadn’t been like the first. There was no warning signs from the scouts nor was there a frontal assault. These things attacked like cowards; striking from the back and hurting the civilians.

At least the Oingo Boingo Brothers are safe. Don’t know how long that’ll be. Hiroko trusted the two to hide out until the others got back. She just didn’t trust the adults to control themselves this time.

Hiroko couldn’t focus on that. She just had to take out the enemies in front of her.

It didn’t matter what kind of Murralsee they were, or what armour or weapons they had, so long as she had Smoke On The Water. One advantage of a big wide space with lots of fire, and the ability to move around, was that the fires entered her range. She could smother the flames and have a lot more firepower to work with.

Dozens of Murralsee were being filled with smoke that cut, smashed, or even burnt the machines out from the inside. There was even enough smoke for Hiroko to use as a shield to protect herself with. There hadn’t been a single blow that she couldn’t deflect.

Her priority was to meet up with the others. They had to be arriving back soon. One of the last reports that Hiroko had heard was that the others were heading back, having defeated the girl who kidnapped Komaru. All she had to do was hold on until then.

What then? The Murralsee would be defeated, yeah. Then the enemy to worry about was Haiji—if that even still was Haiji who Hiroko had been taking orders from. She had to tell Rohan about the nails. It fit the profile of Yoshikage Kira perfectly.

She didn’t know how it happened—maybe Kira's Stand had a third power that let him steal identities—but Yoshikage Kira had become Haiji Towa in all but physique. He was too small and underweight to be the real Haiji. Bastard changed up his belt and clothes to hide that fact.

You killed Ishimaru. Guy just wanted to see his son again, and you didn’t even leave a body. Hiroko's cigarette almost broke in half from the force of her bite. She couldn't forgive that kind of
stuff. Maybe if he had been forced to, and wanted to make amends, but not when Kira did it just to keep his identity safe.

She was almost blind with rage when a Murralsee dropped down from the ceiling. She summoned Smoke On The Water and readied to move back, but it was almost too late. The Murralsee was at least going to get a hit in.

"Miss Hagakure!" Murray jumped from the roof of one of the containers and full-on rugby tackled the Murralsee to the ground. The force of his push and the strength of the container's walls was enough to break the Murralsee's head between the two. He rushed to her side, his whole stance suggesting triumph. "We're saved. The others have returned. They've found an escape route!"

"Was K-Haiji with them?" Hiroko asked. Murray's pose weakened. She could understand why.

Murray had been so sure that Haiji was the real thing. That the man he'd been working with to save everyone was truly a good man. When it finally sunk in, the machine wept bitterly, but accepted the truth nonetheless.

Not that it'd make it easier on him.

"Y-Yes. I spoke with the group. He suspected nothing about our discovery." Murray said, not quite looking Hiroko in the eye. It was weird how machines could act. "To think that he was an enemy of justice. That he was deceiving us this whole time."

"Nothing for it." Hiroko sighed. "I'll tell Rohan. No reason why Koko and Fufu have to be thrown into all this."

That managed to bring some spirit back into Murray's step. "Those two? Ah, it's beautiful, Miss Hagakure. Where they were once cold to one another, now it is they are of one mind. Two fires burning and fuelling one another into something larger and brighter!"

"If you say so." Hiroko couldn't help but smile though. That enthusiasm was too infectious.

Good for those two. They needed the other, especially in these times. Komaru was a sweet girl but was naive and a bit quick to give-up. Fukawa, on the other hand, really needed someone to both give a hug and tell her off. It was good to have those kind of friends.

"Yasuhiro, I wonder if your friends at Hope's Peak are like that too. Hiroko wanted to meet them. She only heard rumours and the like, but she never imagined that her adorable little guy could have really fought someone else and won. At least I did something right in that marriage, raising you right, if you managed to stand up to that Dio guy. Not a piece of shit like I was at your age."

She could hear the Murralsee being torn apart by the second. Komaru, Fukawa, and Rohan together were more than a match for anybody. Kira's Killer Queen was a handy Stand, probably the strongest she had ever seen, but they could survive without it.

That went double, now that they had an escape-route. All Hiroko needed to do was to find Rohan and tell him the truth. Haiji was missing, presumed dead, and Yoshikage Kira took his place.

Hiroko was going to need a cigarette for this one. She had a break from the onslaught of the Murralsee and needed to take the edge off somehow. Being a hostage for months on end and the sense that someone was watching her right now really wrecked the idea of quitting.
As she navigated her way through the containers, she could see Fukawa and Rohan together in the distance, fighting off the Murralsee. It seemed that Komaru and Kira had split off to fend off the other Murralsee. Probably for the best. Better to say it individually.

It was while thinking of a way to both explain what she learnt and how they'd take Kira down that Hiroko realised that she had an empty pack.

"Where the hell are they?" She stopped to wrench the pack open and found that every last cigarette was gone. "Guess I used them up."

Murray quickened his pace to stand next to her. "You know, Miss Hagakure, I have some concerns about the amount of cigarettes you have been consuming-"

"I appreciate the gesture, but I've been rationed these things by a bunch of kidnappers for what's been years now. It's honestly a matter of principle at this point." Hiroko said. It wasn't the best reason, but one nonetheless.

She'd quit when this was all over.

*Or maybe just switch one a day. Be gradual about it.* Hiroko thought, cutting herself a break. An act of self-mercy that was rewarded by what looked like a fresh pack of cigarettes in Murray's hand. Hiroko smiled at the machine.

"See? You can be a cool robot too." Hiroko chuckled at Murray's clear embarrassment. She lit up the cigarette and relaxed herself. Where did Murray even keep all this stuff?

"I'm glad to be of use," Murray said. As he walked ahead of her, Hiroko swore that she saw pure-white eyes darken. "It's amazing how a lying piece of shit like your son could have come from such an interesting woman. If only you knew when to stay out of the business of others."

Those words froze her in place. That wasn't Murray's voice. The passionate and almost overly-polite tone had been replaced by something quieter, darker, and much ruder. What did he mean by what he said about her son? He never met Yasuhiro before. Why would he say that?

"Murray, what the fuck did you-"

"Look over here."

Hiroko knew those words.

The words that spoke whenever a Murralsee's burning wreckage was close enough to a few others, but Haiji didn't want to risk going out in case the Alarm Murralsee went off. The little tank-thing with a skull for a head that could destroy small shops with enough heat to attract it. The second Stand power of Yoshikage Kira.

Sheer Heart Attack flew from the ground behind her and towards the burning cigarette in her mouth. Smoke On The Water, trailing behind her, had managed to muffle the sound of the mobile bomb and hid it from sight as well. All until it sensed the heat above.

There was no time to act. She had to do something.
Smoke On The Water wafted above to surround her and Sheer Heart Attack. It'd at least act to protect her against the explosion. Maybe, if she timed it right, she could even turn the explosion into smoke and-

Sheer Heart Attack detonated.

It was strange how the mind slowed down in death. Seconds became years and the world became a frenzy of bright colours that could almost blind you.

Hiroko could see the shock-waves that slammed against her chest and shattered every rib in her body. She could touch the flames that scorched through skin and muscle, charring pale skin and turning it crisp-black. She could even taste the smoke that flowed inside her from an open mouth, rapidly losing teeth, as Smoke On The Water was blown back.

All she could do was make a last few changes with what was becoming nothing but a skeleton with burnt meat on it. Change the pressure of the smoke around her hands so that at least something would come flying off. Something far away from Kira's reach.

Rohan must have known about the Hime Hand Killer. That was why he asked her to investigate him. So he'd understand what five charred finger bones could mean, right? Hiroko wasn't just being an idiot in ripping off her own hand and flinging its remnants towards him and Fukawa.

She wasn't exactly sure when she died. All she felt was her skull crashing against the metal container, the shock-waves smacking against her heart, and the smoke around her giving way to flame.

_Hurts a lot less than I thought._ Hiroko thought. _I'm sorry Rohan, Koko, Fufu. You guys are just gonna have to take this guy out on your own. Or who knows? Maybe I'll come back as a ghost. That'll be fun. I can mooch off Yasuhiro and make sure he dates a nice girl._

_Just wish we could have met again. See what crazy thing he's predicting this time. That'd have been nice..._

Hiroko Hagakure then died.

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"I know that a lot of us didn't want to be here," Komaru's voice couldn't even find strength. The first actual sentence she managed to say and it was in whimpers. "We all wanted to be back home with our families. Talking about whose turn it was to take out the trash, or what to watch tonight, or who really won that Monopoly game. Not underground in some stinky smokey base afraid for our lives."

Everyone was silent and downcast as always. Komaru wasn't reaching them at all. Not after everything that had just happened; not after everyone that they had lost.

Komaru's bottom lip wobbled and her fists shook when she remembered seeing Hagakure's body. She had been defending the base with Murray while they had been out. Murray said that one of the Bomber Murralsee got to her.
There was barely anything left on the body. The cool and collected Hiroko Hagakure had been replaced by a roasted and unrecognisable corpse. The only way to identify were was by the pack of cigarettes that laid next to the body.

Haiji had been one of the first to see the body and fled to his room. She must have been one of his few confidants and now she was dead. Maybe he thought this was his fault for not staying.

Rohan had been heart-broken as well. He knelt by the body and was shaking all over; the sadness finally getting to the stoic mangaka. It wasn't right that he'd look that way. But it wasn't right that someone like Hagakure had to die like that.

The only reason Rohan got up was to tell Komaru that it wasn't her fault. It didn't stop her from thinking it. If she hadn't been fighting with Fukawa, if she hadn't let herself get kidnapped, then the others wouldn't have needed to find her. They could have been here to help her.

Fukawa and Murray told her otherwise. They were pillars of support for her, just as Rohan was, and Komaru almost felt like she was relying on them again. Leaning on them physically and emotionally while crying her eyes out.

Was this what everyone else had been going through? Did Makoto have to hold people like this and tell them that they couldn't give up? Komaru just wanted to see her brother and parents again.

Hagakure wanted to see her son again too. Yuta wanted to see his sister. Fujisaki his daughter, and Takaaki Ishimaru his son.

*Who's going to help them now? All those people on the Hunted List?* Komaru knew the answer to that. It was going to have to be her. She was going to have to be the hero she had been waiting for. *I'm not running away anymore. I won't let them be victims.*

Komaru breathed in and out. In and out. She had to summon every last bit of strength within her. The strength that saw her through this whole adventure so far. The kind of strength that Rohan, Fukawa, and Hagakure were able to show this whole time.

It was like Hagakure was standing right behind her, whispering the words in her ears, with that familiar smokey scent filling the air. Komaru could always see ghosts, but she had never felt this pushing force before.

Murray was there as well—the machine who sacrificed himself living on as a soul-screaming encouragements. There was no bitterness over Komaru's actions. He himself had told her to bring him down to trigger the explosives. To finally seal the hole in the barrier.

*“There are worse things than death. There is to live a life filled with regrets over what we have failed to do. To continue living is meaningless if it is to suffer. Komaru, you must strike me down so that we can overcome this Despair. Do it! Before my cowardice overcomes me and I am cursed to regret my life forever!”*

Yuta and Fujisaki were there too. Gently pushing her forward and cheering her on. The souls of all those who had fought and died for everyone to escape this nightmare were behind her. They were there to lend support and push her forward.

She wouldn't let them down!
"We're all scared and just want to go home, but..." Komaru almost whimpered but stopped herself. With a long and deep breath, she unleashed everything that she had. "How long are we just going to be victims?"

The scream caused the entire crowd to gasp. Whether from her words, or just the volume, they were amazed at Komaru. They hadn't attacked her yet, though, so she kept on.

"Are you really just fine with excusing ourselves like this? We're not Talented, we're average, we're weak, and so what? Does that mean we should just wait here and die? Flee across the ocean and hope we won't die on the way; while letting these people who did this own our homes?" Komaru was barely getting the words out. Her chest felt like it was getting pressed on. "We all face the same fears and suffering. Isn't that what the Tragedy was?

"If we keep on pretending like we can't do anything. If we just wait for other people to save us," Komaru had to stop. The memory of everyone who had been killed was getting to her. She was crying like a baby. "We'll just keep losing what's important to us. It's okay to be scared. I'm scared! But if I just left this place, left Fukawa to fight alone...I'd have regretted it forever. I want a happy ending with Fukawa and Rohan-sensei and everyone else here! A big cliche one that Rohan-sensei would make fun of for lacking depth! But we can't just hide, or abandon this place.

"We built this city, didn't we? So we can't just abandon it and everyone inside it to die. So, please, won't you fight this Despair with us?!

That final howl echoed throughout the entire base. Hundreds of dejected faces gazed up at her without any emotion behind their eyes. Komaru didn't know if they hated it enough that they wouldn't even boo it, or if they were too deep in despair to hate it.

*At least I tried*

A single clap cut off Komaru's thoughts. It was quickly followed by another clap, then another, and then another, until they quickly lost their pattern and became a series of claps that didn't end. Komaru's eyes instantly went to the source of the noise.

It was Rohan! Rohan was clapping her! Rohan Kishibe-the super-talented and super-picky mangaka-was clapping for her! There wasn't a hint of deception of mockery in his eyes. He really did believe in her.

Like a virus-no, that was bad-sounding, more like a stack of dominoes, the mood began to spread. It was like the single reaction had knocked them out of their shock. Blurred and vacant expressions gave way to something that Komaru hadn't seen in a long time. A noise erupted that she hadn't heard in months, if not years.

Hope. People were lighting up with hope and finding the power to have faith again.

Komaru was still crying like a dumb baby, but she was smiling too. She looked down to see that Fukawa was smiling up at her as well, even if she immediately frowned when she noticed Komaru looking and smiling at her. It was okay that Fukawa was shy. Komaru was too.

But they had been transformed. They weren't just two girls and a mangaka running from place to place, searching for safety. Now they were the heroes who would bring the Warriors of Hope to justice.
They would save Towa City, they would save Togami, they would save the adults, and they would even save the children.

_I promise, Hagakure. I won't let you down. I won't let anyone down._ Komaru smiled at the crowd as she began to get off the stage she had been standing on. She moved over to Fukawa while Rohan was moving towards the two. _I'll be like Makoto. I'll be Hope, even if I can only do it with Fukawa, Rohan-sensei, and everyone else's help. That's good enough right?_

It had to be. Komaru wasn't going to let everyone down.

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"Do you think Hagakure would be proud of us?" Komaru asked.

What kind of question was that to drop on someone? Fukawa was only just starting to get used to this 'friend' thing and now she was having to comfort Komaru again? It was almost too much.

It wasn't like before. She could have just written her off as whiny or getting distracted by tragedy, but not anymore. Her...friend-gah, it still felt weird to say—had proved her courage a hundred times over. Not to mention how she died.

Komaru still felt at fault. As if she was the only reason that she and Fukawa had that fight. It wasn't as if Fukawa wasn't allowed to tell the truth back at Towa Tower. She was just as much at fault for Hiroko Hagakure's death as Komaru, and none of them were as much at fault as the people behind this.

Fukawa wanted to say that and more, but she couldn't. They were deep underground in the labs of the Towa Group and had to keep moving with all these Murralsee. These things didn't go down easy.

It was different to when Fukawa had first met Komaru. It used to take five shots from the Hacking Gun to destroy a Murralsee and now every other shot was a direct hit to the eyes. This whole experience had changed her.

So why was Fukawa so uneasy now? Why did she have a crawling feeling down her spine that something was _wrong_?

Maybe that was why she couldn't say anything to comfort Komaru.

_Like you could. Can't even let her call you Touko._ Her mind hissed. Fukawa pushed the thought down. It wasn't her fault that she wasn't used to hearing that name. Today had been the first time that she ever actually thanked someone! The first time that someone was her friend.

Maybe she should say something.

"I think she'd be proud that you're taking the fight to them." Fukawa muttered out. She no longer had control over her mouth. "I knew her kid, y'know. Real dumbass. Believed in the occult and all that crap. Tried to sell his friends organs to pay off yakuza debts and went into hiding."
"But she said such nice things about him." Komaru said, looking aghast. The occult-idiot did sound like a scum-bag when you mentioned all that.

"That's what mothers are meant to do, I guess. Act like their brats are made of gold," Fukawa sighed and looked down. How was she going to explain this to Hagakure? Maybe she could lighten up a bit. "But he did try to help kill Dio. Didn't deserve to have his mother die like this."

"No one deserved to die like that." Rohan practically barked those words out. Fukawa might have been offended if he was even looking at her. It almost seemed like he was saying it to Haiji.

*Guess he really didn't like the evacuation plan.* Fukawa thought to herself.

There were tensions still, but none between Komaru and Fukawa. The main two seemed to be Haiji and Rohan, the latter glaring daggers into the former who avoided even looking at him. Haiji was being distant to the rest of the group too.

He seemed to want nothing more than to reach the Saint Murralsee and get this whole thing over. Whether he was just ashamed of his earlier plans or not, he was more curt and suspicious than before. None of the old attempts at joining in with the group.

Murray was more than making up for it. The damn thing was a chatterbox in Rohan's arms. It was almost enough that Fukawa wished he did blow up.

But he didn't and now he was nothing more than a head that had to be carried everywhere. Not even by a cute girl like herself or Komaru, but some weedy glorified-doujin writer like Rohan.

It didn't help that it meant Rohan couldn't drive the bike. It fell to Komaru to drive the damn thing.

Fukawa prayed that her friend didn't get the taste for that kind of thing. That'd be Naegi's problem to deal with when they got out of this damn city. He could be the one to contain that wild woman.

Haiji slightly turned his head as they neared yet another door. "We're almost at the point where the Saint Murralsee is waiting for us." He said, before turning back ahead. "Murray, you'll have to assist in navigating the machine. It's our best chance at winning this war."

"Yes! We'll be the shining light that guides everyone out of this hell." Murray cried out. He grunted out as he tried to move forward, only to nudge ahead slightly in Rohan's hands. "If only I had a body to assist in a more useful way..."

"We're just glad you're okay. I'm happy that I didn't kill you." Komaru said, which Murray seemed to appreciate.

"Strange how you remembered this thing." Rohan kept a harsh glare on Haiji. "Why the hell didn't you use it before?"

"Too many Murralsee were down here for me alone and..." Haiji paused, as if to consider his next words. "My father didn't tell me about it." Haiji reached the door and began to type in the password. "He didn't trust me with a lot of stuff. I wasn't really the reliable type for a while. This thing was meant to be in case Ultimate Despair tried anything. We didn't know about Stands and it seemed like the ultimate defence weapon."

Haiji pressed a button and the doors opened for the group. It was easy for all five to enter and see
exactly what the Saint Murralsee was meant to be.

It towered over every last one of them. A large white being in the shape of a Murralsee, it had the pattern of black chains coiling around its body painted on, the design even reaching to circle around the top of its head. It was slightly changed to resemble a crown of thorns. Its arms were held up as if the Murralsee itself was being crucified.

Just the sight of the thing made Fukawa want to vomit.

"I'd have gone with a less shitty design." She muttered.

"Marketing and Design Departments were probably going to be re-structured even if they weren't all dead." Haiji shrugged his shoulders and walked towards the Saint Murralsee. "Nothing for it than to activate it and begin the adv-"

There was a sound. A sound of air being cut apart by a small object flying at high speeds. Fukawa recognised it. It was the sound that she and the rest of the Class 78 survivors had to learn about to survive that period between slaying Dio and the Future Foundation picking them up.

The sound of a sniper round.

The bullet cut through the skin of Haiji's right arm, droplets of blood spattering to the ground, as the others summoned their Stands. We Built This City, Smells Like Teenage Spirit, Heaven's Door, and Killer Queen were all at the ready. The shot had come from above.

*Where the hell did that-* Fukawa had no time to think. The sound came again and she barely moved to the side quick enough that only some of her hair was lost by the shot. Any closer and she'd be missing a piece of her left ear. Then what would Byakuya think of her?!

The ceiling itself was shaking. The two holes were far too large to be from a mere sniper-rifle, but the distance it must have travelled meant that it was cutting through solid earth, stone, and metal. How was this possible?!

"Everyone, over here!" Rohan screamed. He was standing by an extension of the room where large metallic boxes waited. Fukawa didn't care what they were; she just dashed towards them with a wail. All rush to same place. "Right side, Haiji!" Rohan barked, as the Resistance leader parted ways from Fukawa and Komaru, still looking behind.

The ceiling groaned before a part of it collapsed. The culprit was a giant robot that had the appearance of a sniper hiding out in the desert, down to the beige scarf, with an eye-patch in the shape of a Murralsee face. By its side was none other than Nagisa Shingetsu himself, holding one of those control consoles.

He looked different. Before, he looked calm, composed, and in-control of himself. Nothing like the wretch before them now. His spikes were broken, his face was blue-like something was choking him-and his eyes were shaking with Despair. There was none of that old certainty.

Around him was the Stand Nirvana. It looked different from before; the scouter had been replaced by a metallic line that almost seemed to dig into the upper right side of Nagisa's face. Fukawa followed the line to where it connected to a silverish circlet and noticed the outline of a metal line coiling around his arms and legs. They probably all connected to a single line that went from the bottom of his spine to the top of his head, where it connected to the circlet again.
"Not even Act 2...Not even Act 2..." Shingetsu mumbled to himself, his voice barely carrying over. He turned to the Saint Murralsee and empty eyes narrowed at it. "I have to destroy this machine. I have to follow Monaca's orders. She's the only one who still expects something of me."

"What the hell is he doing?" Murray snapped. Fukawa's eyes widened. That was the first time that she had ever heard him swear.

"I will destroy it. The threat to Heaven." Shingetsu's voice shook and the tears were already falling down his eyes. It might have reminded Fukawa of Komaru's speech earlier; but where hers was Hope, his words were nothing but the abyss of Despair. "Dio's paradise that he promised to us. I will protect it! Everyone is counting on me. I have to meet their expectations! I have to show that I can follow orders! I can't fail here. I'll do it. The most skilled robot-user. The Stand with the most potential. That's what Dio said. I'll work harder on it. So please! Count on me more. Expect more of me! Father, Mother, Monaca, Dio, please! Don't abandon me!"

He was going through some kind of mental breakdown. The lights of his cirlet were flashing again and again while the metallic wires between the points embedded in his arms, legs, chest, and head, were doing their best to fray about. The Stand was beginning to go rogue under a user that was losing his mind.

"Act 2? This world has it too?" Rohan whispered. Fukawa had to resist the urge to snap at him. Was this really the time for role-playing? Shingetsu had already vanished from sight. Fukawa hid behind the box while Rohan went for a peek. "Komaru, Fukawa, listen to me. There are levels to his Stand. With each new level, the Stand grows stronger. Going by his words, and those shots, he's probably a skilled snipe-"

Rohan stopped speaking and ducked down. The next round wasn't like the first two. That laser-rifle could fire the whole blast rather than just the bullet. It was a miracle, well more a tragedy, that his stupid hair was only slightly burnt. It didn't help that they didn't see where it came from.

"Hey, Komaru." Fukawa said. "The next thing you're gonna say is that we need to take the fight to him, don't we? Can't let him kill the Saint Murralsee."

"Fukawa, you're physic?" Komaru asked, with total amazement in her voice. Fukawa was relieved that her glare shut her down. Komaru went back to being serious. "Right. Fukawa, your taser's running low, so you take the back while Rohan-sensei and I-"

"I'm not letting you do that." Fukawa's taser didn't have all the power in the world, but it was still enough, dammit! She wasn't going to let Komaru do this alone. "A-After all this time I've spent telling you to take charge, I'm not just gonna hide away in the back as well."

"Touk-I mean, Fukawa." Komaru whimpered, Fukawa shivering at the sound of her first name being said. Luckily, she didn't notice and turned to Rohan instead. "Rohan-sensei, are you ready?"

"Any day. The strategist that loses his mind and goes berserk isn't as original as this kid thinks. His mental instability is where he'll slip up, knowing his type." Rohan replied.

"I'll wait by the back and keep any Murralsee off your back." Haiji cried out, standing behind a different box.

Rohan glared back at him, fists balling themselves, but he probably realised that there was a time and
a place for arguing. Everyone readied themselves for the fight ahead and left the cover of the metallic boxes. They separated to force Shingetsu to choose a target himself.

"When you're dead...Monaca and I will be the Adam and Eve of Heaven...we'll create a pure world." Shingetsu said, his voice echoing throughout the room. The thought made vomit rush up Fukawa's throat. "Dio will smile down from Heaven."

Fukawa readied the taser while Komaru and Rohan pulled out their weapons; a Hacking Gun and a pen. Fukawa supposed that Rohan drawing fire might distract the robot for Komaru, and maybe even lure out Shingetsu with that dirty tongue of his. The three of them were more than enough.

The only thing Dio will be doing is seeing another one of his plans go up in smoke from the fires of hell. Their Stands were ready and Fukawa was ready to use her taser the second Komaru gave the signal.

Haiji withdrew himself further back and the others began to move. That machine might have been big and have serious firepower, but it stood out like a third-grade girl who just wanted to make friends yet everyone made fun of her for having a stink-bug for a friend. As for Shingetsu, every Stand had a weakness and this Nirvana was no different.

Find out what it does. Find its weakness. Then take down the user and the robot. They did it three times before and now they were going to make it four.

As long as Fukawa had Komaru—and maybe possibly Rohan Kishibe—by her side, they would never lose.

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Dio looked at the giant Murralsee that tore its way through Towa City. The metropolis that had been an island of safety against the force of Dio's power—only its survival came merely from Dio's will—was now truly in chaos.

The blood of thousands poured through the streets and now it came time for judgement for the children. They had the sense to hide while the adults marched. It wasn't hard for even Dio to listen in on the commands of the Saint Murralsee.

"March on Towa Hills. Destroy everything in the way of our Hope. Do not deviate from the path."

Yoshikage Kira and 'Murray' made for an excellent team, so long as neither got in the way of the other. Dio knew himself and believed he had the measure of Kira. Neither man could fight well as a pair. They would only negate the natural advantages of the other.

Monaca and the Vizier were waiting for the right moment. Nothing could stop Komaru, Fukawa, and Rohan from reaching the air-ship. Murralsee now fell at the feet of Naegi's little sister with a single shot and the Genocider could cut her way through armies now.

It took sacrifices to reach this point. He only wished that his Friend could have stayed to witness all this, but he knew nothing about the plan. All Dio could be grateful for was that his Friend would arrive soon enough. Izuru would have to be an unwelcome bonus; the two seemed unaware of the
other's movements.

What are you planning, Izuru? Dio knew that the failed experiment was thinking of something. That a tiny part of him still dared to think of Dio as anything other than his new master. The death of his master may have made him bold.

Just as it did with those bastards who defiled him. Komaeda was lucky that he had left already. They'd best pray that Dio would be convinced to forgive their sins.

Still, it wasn't like Izuru's defiance would matter. In a matter of hours, Dio would have avenged every defeat that he had suffered ever since Kyouko Kirigiri dared to defy him, ever since Makoto Naegi didn't simply stay down, and ever since those last classmates of Dio's dared to rise up against him.

He would be complete again. He would have a Stand again. He would be like a God. It was almost enough to make him grateful to Naegi for what he did. Almost. Death had cursed him in many ways, only Pet Shop has been able to sense him, forced to watch over his corpse's defilement, and drive his Friend towards his plan.

If the Vizier was completely aware, Dio couldn't tell, but the AI knew enough that it sided with Friend's plan. The plan that relied only on the joint faith in the Fate of Dio Brando; to reach out and reclaim Heaven.

A faith that will be rewarded. Dio smiled to himself as the Saint Murralee drew closer. For I, Dio, have finally seen what I only had glimpses of before. Heaven. Peace of mind. Hope. The destiny that I witnessed all those years ago. You, Komaru Naegi, will be the bridge that will bring me to the land of the living again. I shall spread the word of how Heaven must be reached.

The last thing that Makoto Naegi would witness, before seeing the power of Heaven itself, would be the sight of Dio's return. All of the Hope he created will turn to ash as he would drown in despair. He would curse his own weakness.

Because Dio Brando remained on this Earth. He would have a body again. He would bring peace of mind to a world trapped between life and death.

As Komaru Naegi marched towards her Fate, Dio laughed, for she was the vessel with which he would ascend to Heaven.

Hiroko Hagakure/Smoke On The Water: Dead
Nagisa Shingetsu/Nirvana: Retired
Nagito Komaeda/Get Lucky: Retired

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Stand Stats

Nirvana
User: Nagisa Shingetsu
Stats
Destructive Power: E-D
Speed: A-B
Range: B-E
Durability: E-E
Precision: B-A
Developmental Potential: D-C

Abilities
Act 1 allows the user to scan their surroundings at a maximum range of 100m and supply the user with information on the environment and all 'foreign objects' which are relevant to the user's needs. 'Foreign objects' are defined as living beings and inanimate objects which do not consider the room to be their home. Cannot provide information which the 'foreign objects' themselves are unaware of. Information given to the user is dependent on the user's own priorities at the moment of scanning.

Act 2 allows the user to enhance their physical and mental capabilities. The extent of this enhancement is dependent on the perception of the user's maximum potential by other humans within a range of 20m.

She Sells Sanctuary
User: Monaca Towa
Stats
Destructive Power: D
Speed: C
Range: A
Durability: C
Precision: A
Developmental Potential: A

Abilities
Stand is activated when user initiates conversation with a target.

When target undergoes trauma, or recalls memory of such, She Sells Sanctuary can begin to 're-program' mind of the target. Can force target to dwell on trauma and force 'memory-loops' until target breaks from it. User is then seen as a source of stability and safety by the target, and target will attempt to please user by any means necessary.
"Do you understand, Monaca?" Dio's Friend asked. He was holding her shoulders and actually had some strength in his voice. "You can't just lock out the others. You all need to work together on this."

It had been five days since Dio Brando's death and Monaca had only now started actually talking to someone. The other Warriors of Hope had been driven to the rooms in despair and it wasn't like her family cared. As long as the money rolled in, they were fine.

They acted like it wasn't because of Dio that the Towa Group were where they were now. Ungrateful bastards. Monaca wanted to kill the both of them the second she saw their faces. They dared to look relieved about Dio's death.

Instead, she was sitting and listening to Dio's Friend talk about this plan. Not just any plan, but a plan decided by a hawk on a ouija board.

"Pet Shop can see him, Monaca." The friend had said. "I don't know how, but Dio's spirit survived his body. He's still alive, Monaca. He's still alive. He just needs our help."

Monaca had been overjoyed. She loved Dio. She loved him more than there were stars in the universe. She'd have broken her legs for real, flayed the skin off her back, and cut her throat for Dio. Just for a second more.

But she had given that hope up. Makoto Naegi and his little buddies had dared to kill the greatest man who had ever lived. The only one who had laughed when Monaca laughed and smiled when she smiled. All without an ounce of pity.

He understood her more than the others. They never knew who she was. Dio was the one who knew what it meant to lie in order to enjoy acceptance. To live knowing that, despite the riches around you, there was the stream of abuse and manipulation.

She could have grown up to be the woman he always wanted, if he asked her to. She certainly would have been a better partner than Dio's wimpy friend.

Doe-like eyes stared into hers, the friend having removed his mask for the purposes of this conversation, and Monaca was unimpressed. This was the guy Dio liked so much? He was who Dio was banging? Lame.

He was even insisting that Monaca include the other Warriors of Hope in this plan. The plan to ready a body for Dio's spirit to reside in so that he could share his secrets with them.
The friend didn't say why it couldn't be Monaca. He probably didn't even know. Some friend he was.

Monaca didn't want to share Dio! She had to compete with Shingetsu and that was because he had that stupid Nirvana. It wasn't right. Dio meant to pick up Monaca only. The others were just dead-weight. He loved her the most!

It was a testament to her Dio-like willpower that she kept a straight face. If she had a tantrum, she risked losing this 'Vizier Murralsee' and Dio's head and Dio's friend might do it this himself. Or worse, giving the head to the other Warriors of Hope.

They could say they loved her all they liked. She didn't need them. Dio taught her the right way to live. To treat everyone and everything as a tool to help you. To trust yourself and put yourself first at all times.

So she decided to lie.

"Don't worry, Monaca may be a kid, but she's mature," She added a sad smile to win him over some more. "Monaca would really like to see Dio one more time. She didn't get to say goodbye."

"I know." Dio's friend put a hand on her shoulder. His voice even shook. "You're going to have to be brave. The Demons you killed? You might have to kill more. Only a few. Just the ones that might get in the way. Just make sure that Komaru Naegi is in a state where she'll accept Dio. Where she'll resist even Makoto Naegi's words. If she's forced into it, then Dio will be vulnerable to Livin' On A Prayer. We need her to be completely without Hope. Can you do that for me?"

"Monaca can do that easy." She replied, lying through her teeth. Monaca was already thinking of her own plan. One that'd make sure that only she got to enjoy seeing Dio again when he came back.

The death-toll would have to be higher and Komaru Naegi was going to have to go through the wringer. Her will might be too strong to simply welcome Dio Brando into her soul. Plus it meant eliminating the other Warriors of Hope.

Monaca Towa eagerly nodded and said everything that Dio's friend probably wanted her to say. It was a tactic she had learnt in her time in the Towa household; lest she'd have been hated even more. This time, rather than just acceptance, she was aiming for an actual prize.

So she was given Vizier Murralsee and Dio's friend disappeared into the shadows to his base in the Future Foundation. It was so easy to make someone believe what they wanted to believe.

"We'll finally be together again, Dio." Monaca whispered. She wondered if her words could reach through the metal plating of the Murralsee. If it could even reach through the boundaries of life and death. "Just you and me. The way it was meant to be."

Monaca had a purpose again. No longer was she trapped in an endless depression, but had now been inspired. The way forward had been shown and she would take it no matter what. Any cost was worth seeing the face of Dio Brando again.

Any cost was worth bringing back the only light in her life.
Komaru Naegi was finally broken.

Dio had spent long enough waiting. He had waited patiently under the very floor of Monaca's grand hall, waiting for the right moment to strike, and it came with the sight of Komaru's parents hanging lifelessly like clothes on a hook. Their bodies captured in mid-sway by the picture.

The family and normality that Naegi's little sister had sought was revealed as the illusion it always was.

What others horrors must she have seen? The piles of corpses stacked so high that they went up to her waist. The blackened and foul 'hope' that she inspired in the Resistance. The leader she had trusted reveal to be nothing more than a serial killer determined to live in peace, no matter the cost others had to pay. The controller that would murder tens of thousands of children if broken; now charged with Killer Queen's bomb, to keep the arrogant elitist mangaka at bay.

Or perhaps it was the realisation that every decision she made was decided for her. All of her battles and victories had been just what her enemies wanted from her. The growth from a pitiful coward to a proud warrior was nothing more than a grand rise to befit a fall like none other.

Komaru had stopped caring then. She cried out that she no longer gave a damn about children, adults, Hope, Despair, or anything. The nightmare had gotten to her and she wanted it to end. No more being the hero of Kishibe's little fantasy, no more being the person Fukawa wanted her to be.

This poor girl just wanted to go back to the days where she had false hope. The security of her prison and the untainted memory of her family.

Monaca was a smart girl. She had prepared many plans on only the basic whims of Dio's ultimate designs and none of them interfered with his own. All she knew was that she had to make Komaru Naegi willing to house his spirit. Instead, she eliminated all rivals and created the perfect trap for Dio's new body.

What I'll need is my Stand, Holy Diver. A Stand is but a fragment of a soul. Thus, Dio is Holy Diver and Holy Diver is Dio. What I'll need is my soul. The lives of more than 36 souls who have sinned, for those who have sinned harbour great power, is needed. I shall need a 'Friend' unmoved by political power, fame, wealth, or sexual desire. 14 phrases must be remembered...

The riddle that haunted ever since he found peace of mind. Of which he only had dreams of fragments before.

Death had been a blessing. Holy Diver's touch on a single hair of his head had saved Dio's soul from entering the afterlife. But the soul was saved at the cost of the body and Holy Diver itself. He was forced to be a witness to the butchering of his body and unable to speak with his Friend. The only one left who knew of his plans.

It had been Fate that made Pet Shop capable of seeing him; Dio was sure of it. The same reason that his Friend had brought the falcon that had been entrusted to his care, when he came to recover what was left of his corpse. All so that Dio would have the chance to retake what belonged to him.
That time had come.

The mangaka saw him. Just as he had apparently seen the spectre of Tokuichi possess Komaru’s body. Dio relished that moment of absolute despair on the face of that blowhard who believed himself so wise and great.

Dio found himself in an empty black void barren of anything but a teenage girl folded into a ball and crying into her knees. To the physical world, she was simply staring at a charged controller with blank eyes; no longer caring enough to not destroy it but also too deep in despair to make the move itself.

The soft sobs were like music to his ears as Dio wrapped his arms around her. His lean but muscular chest pressed against Komaru's back and he positioned his head to be right next to Komaru's right ear.

"It's okay, Komaru Naegi. This cruel and barbaric choice. You don't have to decide." Dio's voice was a whisper. His tone was that of a lover.

"Dio? Dio Brando?" Komaru's voice was weak and curious, perhaps still associating him as the Ultimate Male Model. Dio felt her 'body' tense up at the memory of hearing his deeds. "No! You're not some poster. You're evil! You're the reason this is all happening!"

"Did I, Dio, murder your parents? Did I, Dio, burn this city to the ground?" He asked. Dio's voice did not change one decibel. That might have been why Komaru didn't try to escape his hold. "Aren't you tired of all this? Of having to see friends die and people suffer? Do you truly want to make this decision? Kill thousands of innocent children, or let the genocide of this city continue? What kind of decision is that to force on you?"

"I don't care! I want everything to just stop. If breaking the controller makes it all stop. If it means I don't get hurt anymore," Komaru sniffed and her tone turned dark. Darker than Dio ever imagined for a sister of Naegi's. "Then fine. I'll break it. I'll be the new Dio."

He couldn't stop him from laughing at the thought. Luckily, he had enough control for it to be soft, his gut gently bumping against Komaru's spine, as he moved closer to her ear. "There is another way. A way where you can avoid making this decision. You can have peace of mind again. You can live in a world with even your family together again."

Your brother may live. The sight of this will be sufficient enough punishment before I make him an eternal slave to Dio. He thought. Death would be too kind compared to this. Naegi would be forced to see that it was his own blood that destroyed all his efforts.

Komaru sniffed again. Dio could read her body posture and the soft changes that came with shifting facial expressions. Komaru was clearly interested in Dio's offer. To be free of this hell she found herself in and put an end to her own suffering.

"Give me your body, Komaru." She gasped in his hold. Dio knew what she was thinking and smiled, pulling her closer with the barest resistance. "No. Not in that way, although you are very pretty. I mean give up control of it to me. I, Dio, will be the one to rule over your body and you can stay here and have the rest you deserve."

"B-But what about Monaca? You tried to kill everyone. You tried to take over the world. You hurt
"Strange how you seem to care more about that last one. Is friendship more important than others? I don't blame you. I have a friend too. He's so much like you. I helped him when he was like this. I reminded him of the world we wanted to create. We'd bring Heaven and give mankind eternal peace of mind. A world of Hope. Doesn't that sound like something you'd want?"

"You promise you won't kill anyone?" Komaru asked. He could smell the desperation on her.

"I promise that no life shall be ended by your hands, when I, Dio, am in control of them." Dio slid his right hand down to hold her own. He gripped firmly but not tightly and rested the bottom of his chin on her left shoulder. "A single day. That's all I need. You'll have your body back and I will give you Hope so strong that this Despair won't even be a memory. Isn't that better, Komaru? Be the woman who helped Dio reach Heaven; not the girl who let thousands die by her hand."

Silence took hold of the two of them. Komaru had no escape as Dio kept one arm wrapped around her waist and a grip on her right hand that could easily tighten. Yet to someone watching, this was not a woman being restrained against her will. This was a heart-broken girl being comforted in an hour of need.

Dio had never met a women able to resist him. Komaru was no different.

"O-Okay." She said. Her voice was almost as broken as her spirit. "You can have it...my body. You can have it for as long as you like. Just please. Make this stop."

With a simple turning of his arm, once wrapped around her waist, it now span her to look Dio in the eye, he shot up his hand from her own to instead hold her face. It was a gentle hold, his thumb softly stroking her cheek, wiping away her tears.

"You have my word. Just close your eyes and sleep. When you wake up, this will all be like a dream." Dio leaned in and his hold on Komaru's face tightened just enough hat her lips pursed.

Dio and Komaru's lips joined and she did nothing to stop his kiss.

He could feel their bodies becoming one. Not in this mind-space of Komaru's, but in the physical world itself. Dio's soul was attaching itself to Komaru's and easily taking control. She was like a beaten dog that was offered a treat; showing her belly for even the slightest show of affection.

The darkness around Dio turned into light itself. His body raced upwards as the blinding lights began to take shape for him. He could see a large and long hall where the shattered window where the Vizier had plummeted from. If he was lucky, the body might have protected the jar holding his head.

Dio only needed the smallest fragment of his old body to reach Heaven, but it was a matter of pleasure rather than business.

The sensation of wind touching his skin made Dio inhale deeply. He had spent so long under water that the smell of fresh air was like the finest of wines. Dio embraced every sensation that had been denied to him as a mere spirit.

The soft touch of Komaru's, now his, hands as fingers danced along palms. The sight of Kotoko's confusion, Kira's resentment, Rohan's fury, Monaca's delight all welcomed him. The sound of a mob outside roaring and howling for blood made his own race.
Even the drool down the right side of his mouth was as welcome as the finest of riches. It didn't matter if it was unsanitary. It was a sign of life!

Dio Brando had a physical body again. A body with which he could communicate his desires to his Friend; who would be arriving in but a handful of hours. Dio had a Stand with which to fight with.

He finally had a way to reach Heaven.

"Useless." Dio couldn't stop himself from smiling as the shock from that very word silenced the mob. The dark and victorious tone wasn't one they associated with Komaru Naegi. "Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless!

He tasted the word in his mouth. It was a sign of his good fortune that his voice came out of Komaru's mouth, if duelling with her original voice.

The crowd of adults that had once been cheering on for bloodshed—even to the point of forgiving a man like Yoshikage Kira for his deception if it meant killing the children—was now silent. Silent out of horror for what they were seeing. For even they realised that only one man could say that word with the force and power that made it dreaded.

Only one man was capable of such intimidation even when in a body like this.

"No...Komaru..." Fukawa's soft cries meant nothing to Dio. All that mattered was the crowd that had once been baying for blood.

*And blood they shall have!* Dio declared to himself. There was time for thoughts later, however, as Dio had an audience to address.

"I, Dio, have attained a body once more!" He shouted, pushing an open right hand through green hair, and throwing a gripped left fist level to his head. "Willpower! Stand power! Humanity, prepare for your fate! Bow before my knowledge and might! Not even death itself shall deny Dio his destiny. Nothing shall stop me from ascending to Heaven. Let Despair take over your souls again. For tomorrow shall see the end of this old world and the rebirth of the world of I, Dio! Dio's Hope shall reign supreme over all others."

The sight of Fukawa's heart shattering into a million pieces was more than enough to make Dio laugh. One of the fools who had dared to try and kill him had now lost the only friend she had. She would be the first of the six whose will Dio would break into a thousand pieces before he was through.

Fukawa and Togami would be first; the duo who had dared to look down on him would beg to lick his boots, when he was done with them. Then it would be Hagakure, Asahina, and Kirigiri after them. The last would be the one who landed the killing blow.

*Makoto Naegi. I wonder what you'll think when you see your little sister?* Dio grinned at the mental image of Naegi's resolve breaking when faced with his sister. *Livin' On A Prayer* could do nothing if a soul felt no hope, and that was exactly what Dio had destroyed in Komaru. *Your Despair will be my revenge!*

His mind echoed with soft weeping as Dio Brando embraced the glory of living once more.
Fukawa had to keep herself from vomiting at what she was seeing.

"-and Monaca said you didn't care about us and that you only liked her and that it didn't matter if we died or not and, and, and-"

"And I, Dio, am saying she was just playing a cruel prank." Dio made Komaru say. It may have been his voice on top of hers, but Fukawa would never consider the person hugging Kotoko and giving Monaca a sly look to be Komaru.

Komaru Naegi was a stupid cry-baby who had to be dragged along for about two-thirds of this journey and was a horrifyingly mediocre girl in so many ways. She was bad at maths, talked into fans when she was bored, was still into shojo manga, thought about being a goddamn mangaka and took kid's riddles way too seriously. Probably had a brother-complex too.

But she was also braver than most of the people Fukawa knew. She had spent months on end locked away in an apartment, unable to escape, and was let out to a world in flames. She saw corpses stacked on top of each other, towering machines tearing people apart, and given a weapon that had been nearly completely nerfed and told to survive.

And she did. Komaru defeated the Warriors of Hope and a whole army of Murralsee. She reached out and befriended the rudest person that Fukawa ever knew and had proved herself when there was no option. When Fukawa insulted her, she still smiled and offered a hand. When given a chance to escape, and abandon this terrible place, she chose to stay and fight.

How was she rewarded? The Resistance turned her into a symbol of their cruel revenge fantasies. Haiji Towa-or Yoshikage Kira or whatever he was called-had manipulated and lied to her about Hiroko. Monaca designed this whole thing to mould Komaru.

Komaru Naegi deserved more than to have been groomed into a flesh-suit for Dio Brando.

"I'm sorry, Kotoko. I was being mean. Wanna be friends again?" Monaca's joyful tone couldn't hide the ice behind her eyes. Kotoko simply hugged Komaru's leg tighter and nuzzled her face against it, as if to hide herself, much to Dio's amusement.

"I think it'll be a while before she forgives you, Monaca. Give it time. When I, Dio, ascend to Heaven, any sin will be erased, if I desire it so." Dio said, the ugly mixture of his and Komaru's voice echoing through the hall.

"A large ego to boot. What a disappointment." Rohan's voice shook with rage. It matched his posture perfectly. "You're nothing more than the cliche egotistical psychopath who was born evil and wants to rule the world. No nuance. No depth. Just the kind of villain that even today's over-saturated manga fans would find boring."

"Rohan Kishibe. You dare to judge me?" Dio's eyes narrowed and he made Komaru's voice turn cold. Rohan's own eyes widened, confused about the venom in Dio's voice. "No. You should not
expect to know me. I have only heard of you. A man who prides himself on realism and yet sealed himself away in this city. You, who actually missed The World's End itself, dare to judge me? Pathetic; just like you are. Why not crawl back to your hole and draw until you die? It'll be a better use of your time."

Rohan looked like he wanted nothing more than to pull out Heaven's Door and force Dio right out of Komaru's body. Take out this monster who had done so much to twist and torment their friend. Fukawa would have happily cheered him on.

But he couldn't. Not so long as Yoshikage Kira kept that controller charged with Killer Queen and kept a sharp eye on him. They were using the lives of the children as hostages to keep Rohan under control; just like Komaru was the hostage to control Fukawa.

"I've completed my side of the bargain. Now, Dio, give me what I want." Kira said, his voice having to fight over having his back to the group.

Fukawa kept herself from screaming at this man, this freak, who had sold out Towa City for himself. Monaca told them everything, to Kira's anger, but she acted like it wouldn't matter. Maybe it wouldn't. Dio's return would bring about a new Tragedy.

Who'd care about the Hime Hand Killer then?

*All this for a normal life? Just so you can keep on killing women for their hands more like.* Fukawa had thought that Komaru was once just a child who expected no consequences for her actions, but she was wrong even back then. Komaru just didn't want to face them.

Kira? A mere five minute conversation with the real Yoshikage Kira revealed who this man was. A brat in a man's body that wanted to have his cake and eat it; indulging in his hand and murder fetish but without the stigma or retribution for his sins.

Just looking at him made her sick.

*If you wanted a normal life, then you should have tried to find a cure.* The self-loathing part of her brought up memories of Genocider Syo. Of Fukawa fearing that today would be the day she'd be locked away. *At least I never wanted to have my cake and eat it. At least that was because of Syo herself. You can't kill people for sexual kicks and then act self-righteous when someone tries to catch you.*

What could she even do? Killer Queen's hand remained in its position, thumb just covering over as if readying to press down on a detonator, and the only way to stop it would be taking off Kira's hand. It was impossible for either of them at that distance.

Maybe he'd turn on Dio, if he thought he could do it, but the coward stuck with the winning team. Rohan couldn't attack Dio now and Fukawa was left to watch Dio pollute her friend's body.

It was this impotence that ruined everything. Komaru had all choice taken from her and had to decide between killing the children or killing the adults. She lost all hope and became a puppet for Dio.

That triumphant pose disgusted her. That look of utter supremacy in Komaru's eyes, the wide grin on her face, and the general pose of her body wasn't one of a kind-hearted girl who wanted to stop the killing. This was the look of a monster who was glorying in all his power.
Kotoko remained latched on his leg, Monaca glowering from the side, when Komaru's face turned back to Fukawa's and grinned. Dio had seen the glare she was giving him. With a simple wave of the hand, Kotoko let go and scurried back from her restored master.

Dio made Komaru's body take a step forward, a lioness cornering its prey.

"Ah, Fukawa," That sly mockery would never sound right coming from Komaru. Nor did that flash of cruel inspiration. "Or should I say Touko."

"No. Not you." Fukawa growled. She wouldn't let Dio pollute their friendship. "Only friends call me by my first name. Not a pathetic piece of trash like you who takes advantage of teenage girls."

It wasn't natural for Komaru's face to express such black hatred. The last time Fukawa had seen that kind of emotion, it had been because of Judas Priest. Now? It was because someone had taken her body away from her. Dio regained control of his emotions soon enough.

"You wound me, Touko. My presence in this body was accepted by Komaru herself. By this time tomorrow, she will have her body again and I, Dio, shall be where I belong. Standing on top of this world." Dio's smirk only grew larger.

"You belong in the trash." Fukawa hissed. Dio reacted quickly, making Komaru's hand grip the roots of Fukawa's hair as tightly as she could.

"Choose your next words carefully." Dio said, pulling Fukawa in closer. Rohan shifted his wrist when Monaca hummed and pointed to the controller laying on the ground. "You know how terrifying my strength can be."

"Strength? Yeah right." Fukawa laughed. She wouldn't cower before Dio Brando again, meeting his glare with her own. "You can beat me down all you like. You can brutalise this world a hundred times over. But you'll never be strong. Not like how Komaru is strong."

Komaru had a stronger back-hand than she thought. Dio used it to smack Fukawa hard enough that her jaw felt like it was cracking. It fucking hurt. "I don't need you. All I need is the Genocider. She will follow my commands."

She would. Fukawa was the person that knew Genocider Syo best and knew she would obey Dio's commands. Not out of respect or love, but out of fear. Fear of what he'd do to Komaru if she refused. Fear of what she might accidentally do if she resisted.

That was the curse of her Stand. The slightest cut would destroy Komaru.

*I've never seen what happens to someone with that level before.* Fukawa looked at Komaru's dark expression and saw two numbers above her head. The first was a pitch-black 0% for Dio Brando, and the second a pure-white 100% for Komaru. Just as she hated Dio with every bit of her heart, she cared for Komaru with the same strength, and now that hate and love had been turned against her. *I'll kill them. There won't be a part of their body that hasn't been cut.*

She knew that Komaru might hate her if she broke her promise. She'd lose the trust of Byakuya. She'd lose every bond she made at and since Hope's Peak.

But she couldn't disobey. Komaru was too important to her and Dio knew it. That smug smile he made Komaru wear only sickened Fukawa more.
"You will kill in my name. You will declare your allegiance to Dio and we will send the video to the Future Foundation. In their last moments, your friends and allies will curse you for a traitor. The one who enabled my return to happen." Dio made Komaru's smile turn mad. As if enjoying the misery on Fukawa's face. "The name Touko Fukawa will be synonymous with traitor. Disobey and Togami will pay the price."

Fukawa had almost forgotten about Byakuya. Two of the most precious people in her life were under Dio's control and were being used to control her in turn. It might have been funny if it weren't so cruel.

But Fukawa wasn't going to let Dio have the last laugh. She still had acts of defiance in her.

"Dio, you win. I'll do whatever you ask, but know this. You can command my body, but you'll never command my mind, my soul, and even my voice." Fukawa leered closer to Komaru's face. The indignant fury of Dio was its own reward. "So how does it feel? Having to seduce a high-school girl to get anyway must be pretty pathetic. The great Dio Brando, the so-called Ultimate Master, is completely reliant on breaking a girl's spirit just to stay alive. I wonder how Naegi's going to wreck your shit this time."

"Shut up." Dio's anger was bubbling under the surface and Fukawa didn't give a shit.

"Maybe the Warriors of Hope can share out dream-catchers with bits of your soul in them. 'Cause you won't have a body when Komaru decides she doesn't want to time-share and kicks you out." Fukawa laughed in the face of Dio Brando. Memories of a certain report came back to her "It's actually really funny. Did you see it when one of your minions decided to pull a Sada Abe on y-"

She should have expected the punch to the face. It hurt just as bad as the back-hand did, but it was wider on her face. Spit flew out her mouth and Fukawa crashed onto the floor face-first. There was barely time to react. Fukawa felt herself get yanked up by her hair, fingers tugging at roots, and got the wind knocked out of her with one punch.

Komaru wasn't exactly brawny, but she was more than strong enough to fight off someone like Fukawa. With someone like Dio in control, there was nothing to stop this beating.

Fukawa couldn't even fight back. Her blocks were pitiful and any counter would risk cutting Komaru with her nails.

Her only hope lied in the flashes of horror behind Komaru's eyes. The fact that Komaru could see what Dio was making her do. The bruises and welts on Fukawa's body piling up.

Good. Komaru, you have to fight him. Dio can't win if you just stand up and fight. Fukawa could endure this, if it meant Komaru finding the strength to fight back. Rohan took a step forward and his glare doubled in intensity when Monaca pointed to the controller again. Kotoko was covering her ears as Dio began swearing at Fukawa. I know it hurts. I know it feels like there's no point, but you have to fight. Dio can only win by making you his slave. You're stronger than him. Even when I first met you, you were stronger than him. Please, don't let him win because you're scared.

Finally, the beating stopped. Fukawa's was forced to stand up again and look at Dio's infuriated expression.

"Your insolence has cost Byakuya Togami his right hand." Dio hissed. Fukawa couldn't stop herself
from gasping. That put a smile back on the face of her friend. "Your defiance will be punished via Togami. Do you understand?! Bitches like you should know their place and follow commands given by their betters!"

"Wait."

"You dare say that I, Dio, am pathetic?! Touko Fukawa; the girl so pitiful that even before the memory-wipe, her only friends were a stink-bug and Makoto Naegi. Did you know that you were just a failure as you were before?" Dio scoffed. "No one ever called you by your first name before? What a piece of shit. That boy was right to publish your note."

"Stop it."

"You should have knelt at Hope's Peak. I could have made you into something useful. You could have even been with your precious Togami." Dio made Komaru's hand yank on Fukawa's hair. There was a flicker of disgust as Dio realised how greasy it had become, before returning to a look of absolute superiority. "Instead you're just a perverted failure of an author who has never experienced love. You truly think that Komaru Naegi was your friend?"

Fukawa froze in place and her face lost all colour. Dio was that cruel. He knew that Komaru's voice came out with his own and he knew that to say to hurt Fukawa. There were no lines he wouldn't cross. This was just to hurt her.

That was what she told herself. It was just lies to try and hurt her.

"I've seen her memories. She has real friends. People who don't insult her hobbies and preferences. People who comfort instead of confront her." Dio said. He was enjoying this. "The only reason she is even with you is because you're the first person she had a real conversation with in months. Because she was forcibly stuck by your side. Only you could see Stockholm Syndrome like that as friendship."

"No!"

Fukawa wasn't about to cry as she spoke. "Th-That's not true. You're a liar, Dio. It's in your nature to ruin things greater than yo-"

Her reward was Dio throwing her head down against a raised knee. It was a small relief that her nose wasn't broken.

"I said no!"

"She's the one who lied. All those words about friendship and trust were just lies to simply make you do what she wanted. You think an anti-social, paranoid, foul-mouthed bitch like you could have a friend? The second she'd see her brother again, she'd abandon you. Go with people like Asahina and Makoto and forget all about you. You know it, don't you?"

*It's not true. It's not true.* Fukawa had to keep denying it. She had to have faith in Komaru, or else she wouldn't have faith in herself. She couldn't let self-loathing win.

"Stop it!"

"Any last words before I send you into the darkness?" Dio asked. Fukawa softly smiled at Komaru,
who was fighting with all her might inside.

"It's okay, Komaru. You'll always be stronger than Dio." Her smile grew just a bit more. "You're not as weak as him."

That wasn't the right thing to say, if you were concerned with keeping Dio happy. We Built This City emerged from behind him, tears running down its cheeks, as its arms shook while being raised against Fukawa. If Dio noticed this, he didn't show it.

"Weak? I'll show you who's weak when I smash your face in!" Dio had raised a fist that should have smashed against Fukawa's face and knocked her out. He might have done it in a single punch.

Only it was trapped in a firm grip by another hand. Fukawa couldn't stop herself from opening her jaw like an idiot and making incoherent noises. The look on We Built This City was one of pure rage and sadness mixed in together to create a righteous fury like nothing she had ever seen before.

Stands were a manifestation of the fighting spirit of a soul, weren't they? So it made sense that, if a body held two souls, at least one could reside in the Stand, right? And that Stand would never allow its user to do something so horrible and against their moral code that it'd just stand by, correct?

That was all Fukawa had as an explanation for why We Built This City used its grip to throw the Dio-possessed Komaru around so that she was facing the Stand now.

"Stop bullying my friend!"

With a single scream of defiance, the ahoge on We Built This City glowed blue for a brief second before unleashing a bolt of energy that hit Komaru's chest point-blank. Three screams of horror followed.

Monaca and Kotoko were clearly screaming for Dio, and Dio was screaming from whatever had just hit him. Fukawa barely saw Komaru's jaw unhinge as if it were a snake's, mere seconds before the blast of energy struck. It hadn't stopped a foul scream from coming out when she got hit.

No. Foul was too soft a word for it. It was unearthly, ghoulis, and the worst sound that Fukawa ever heard. The blue energy hit Komaru and became an electric shock that crackled over her entire body and even carried over. It was how Fukawa could finally see Dio's ghostly form.

His entire body was crawling out of Komaru's mouth when the energy struck and did nothing to save him. The blue electricity followed him as he glided from Komaru, stumbling and crashing and screaming, and all until he reached the open window left by the Vizier Murralsee.

With a final howl, the ghost of Dio Brando leapt from the air-ship and disappeared from sight. Everyone had witnessed this, from Monaca and Kotoko screaming denials, to Rohan and Fukawa's stuttered awe, and even Kira had a look of confusion on his face.

We Built This City reacted first. The ahoge on top of its 'hair' literally shot out of its head and was caught by its right hand. The Stand turned to face the controller lying on the floor and fired on it with a single blast. The blue energy crackled and shined before striking the controller.

Kira barely reacted in time; Killer Queen pressed down and Kotoko yelped in horror while Fukawa's heart skipped a beat. That was it. The children were dead.
But no. The controller remained intact. Killer Queen pressed its thumb down again and again and nothing happened. Rohan immediately ran towards the controller and picked it up before Monaca could even more, before almost leaping to Fukawa and Komaru's side.

As for Fukawa, she grabbed Komaru's shoulders as the girl fell and bit her lip at the slight shock she got from holding Komaru. Not to mention it was hard keeping her upright. What were they feeding her? How did We Built This City do that?

At the sounds of soft sobbing, however, Fukawa's priorities immediately shifted to Komaru.

"I'm sorry, Touko." She said, before Fukawa could tell her that she didn't need to say it. "I-"

The entire hall began to shake. A loud booming roar echoed and caused the windows to shatter. Everyone was lucky that they were far away from the windows, but that didn't stop the ceiling from starting to cave in. Wait. It wasn't caving in. It was being destroyed!

Two sets of fingers tore through the ceiling of the rooftops and lifted upwards, tearing the roof off the hallway, and revealing the face of the Saint Murralsee. The ceiling was crumbling from the pressure of its grip and the rubble was plummeting down towards them.

Kira and Kotoko were already fleeing towards a staircase leading to the upper levels of the air-ship. Monaca, however, simply stood there and stared up at the Saint Murralsee without blinking. It was like Dio's fleeing had utterly crushed the will to move.

"Apologies later. Run!" Rohan grabbed Komaru and Fukawa by the arms, controller tucked inside his half-shirt, and pulled them along.

Fukawa was barely keeping pace. Didn't this jerk know how to treat a lady? "What about-

"It's fine! I'll explain on the way." Komaru said. Fukawa's couldn't stop herself from staring in shock. That voice. It wasn't just Komaru speaking, but Komaru speaking in that stupid naive and absolutely wonderful tone. "I think We Built This City has a new power."

There was nothing else for Fukawa to do but trust in her friend when it came to this. The three of them followed Yoshikage Kira and Kotoko Utsugi up the stairs and towards the top areas of the air-ship.

She had the feeling that, even with Dio's second demise, this wasn't over.

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I knew it'd be you and me. Rohan glared at Kira. Closed eyes did nothing to ride the sheer amount of anger in his face. He ignored the blood seeping down from his arm. I just didn't think I'd be alone.

That wasn't entirely true. Komaru and Fukawa were helping whenever they could and Kotoko had proved to be very useful in this fight. It was a relief that Monaca hadn't emerged from that rubble or they'd be facing She Sells Sanctuary as well. That'd have narrowed the odds.
What the four of them were fighting instead was Yoshikage Kira in all his shame and the Saint Murralsee. The murderer and the manipulator. Anyone looking at this fight, knowing what Killer Queen and Sheer Heart Attack could do, might have written off Rohan and the others as doomed.

They would have been wrong.

The Saint Murralsee was obviously being controlled by Murray—the thought of Fukawa being right about the AI almost infuriating Rohan more than the betrayal itself. It clearly didn't expect to be fighting. Its limbs and weapons were more suited to wiping out armies instead of two determined fighters.

Kira himself had been taken by surprise. How sure he must have been that he could kill Rohan Kishibe here and now. All he needed to do was close his eyes, hide, and let Sheer Heart Attack do the dirty work. Can't use Heaven's Door on a machine without eyes, can you?

That was before Little Girls. To be specific, Little Girls' dentures firing down and clamping on Kira's right leg. That hadn't pleased the murderer. Kotoko has been covered in soot, ash, and had tears down her face as she ran to Rohan's side.

She might have been loyal to Dio; but she would never follow Monaca or someone like Kira.

That had worked in two ways. The first was that Kira had revealed himself and now had to face his sense of touch rising. The second was Sheer Heart Attack wasn't just useless, it was counter-productive.

That was the thing about being aroused, however artificially. It raised the body temperature.

It was a new kind of battle. A battle between Rohan Kishibe and Kotoko Utsugi on one side, who had to avoid being touched by Killer Queen's hands no matter what, and Yoshikage Kira on the other, who could not open his eyes no matter what.

Komaru and Fukawa were busy fighting the Saint Murralsee. Its attacks consisted on slamming its arms against the ground and firing the latest type of eye-beams. Pure brute force designed to overwhelm a weak opponent.

But Komaru Naegi and—as much as Rohan hated to admit it—Touko Fukawa were not weak.

We Built This City provided shields to protect Fukawa from the Saint Murralsee's anger; Smells Like Teenage Spirit forced the Saint Murralsee back whenever Syo emerged, and the Hacking Gun kept striking at the eyes. The Saint Murralsee never stood a chance.

Komaru was even helping out in Rohan's own fight.

Kira was a clever bastard. His pockets were filled with tiny stones and objects that he could throw towards Rohan and Kotoko and detonate them whenever he liked. That was until Komaru had We Built This City intervene.

The look on Kira's face, even with his eyes shut, whenever Killer Queen tried to activate the bomb only to find We Built This City had negated the charge was a dream come true.

*The power to strip even inanimate objects of an 'affliction'.* Komaru had even managed to neutralise the controller that way. The perfect trap had been disarmed with a single blast. It took a lot for Rohan
to have not applauded at that, settling for a giant smile on his face. *Having a power that prevents the villain's supposedly unstoppable war-path in its tracks. Komaru Naegi, you've impressed me.*

They were a team. All of them; from Komaru and Fukawa to Komaru and Rohan to even Fukawa and Rohan together. The three of them were a solid unit with two objectives. Defeat the Saint Murralsee and Yoshikage Kira, and protect Kotoko Utsugi.

Komaru tagged in when Kira was getting too bold. His Killer Queen was nothing compared to *We Built This City*, the ahoge/ray-gun in its hand easily disabling Killer Queen's charge, while Rohan increased Genocider Syo's athletic abilities. She danced around the eye-beams of the Saint Murralsee like an ice-skater danced on the rink.

A single cut from one of her scissors was enough to make a hole the size of three people on the Saint Murralsee. The great and mighty 'protector' of Towa City stumbled backwards in fear whenever Syo approached it now.

Kotoko's weapons were also helpful. Kira tried to track them via sound and the touch of the wind with their attacks. Rohan couldn't get close without Killer Queen making a wild jab at them. That was where the former Warrior of Hope came in.

Her denture gun managed to force Kira to duck and dive back whenever he tried to advance. There were even a moment where Kira almost stumbled back and off the air-ship itself.

Had Kira and the Saint Murralsee been able to work together, they might have had the advantage.

*But their partnership was just built from necessity and plotting for their next move. They never really trusted one another, and never had to truly fight together.* Rohan thought to himself. Kira had always been the weak link of the team. He and the giant Murralsee were fighting as individuals against a well-oiled team.

Of course they'd be losing.

"Get out of the way, if you don't want to be hit." The Saint Murralsee's voice echoed against the air-ship and rang across the air. A God speaking down to a mortal.

"You're getting in my way. If you hadn't struck at that moment, he'd be dead." Kira snapped back. His closed-eyes didn't hide the naked contempt he had for the Murralsee. A professional's anger at the arrogant amateur.

"Do not question me as if you are more than a mere pawn!" The Saint Murralsee snapped. That was the friendlier side of their interactions.

What had once been a shining white tower of Hope for the Resistance was now stained by the debris, black ash, and even the blue and yellow sparks of electricity from its exposed and cut wires. Oil spewed down the wounds like blood would on a human's. It had become a flawed and malfunctioning machine.

Kira wasn't looking too good either. His final desperate attack had been flinging a hail of pebbles and coins at Rohan from all sides, one of them charged by Killer Queen, while Komaru had *We Built This City* trapped in its shield form. Kotoko had fled back, fearing that she'd be caught in the explosion, and Rohan joined her.
It was panic and anger that doomed Kira's plan. He detonated just as We Built This City was coming out of its shield form—probably afraid that Komaru would react—and unleashed a powerful explosion. Enough that it opened a large hole between himself and Rohan, who was dealing with the flying debris of the explosion.

So yeah, he and the others weren’t in the best shape. Bruises and cuts marred all of them, except Kotoko, and Rohan was pretty sure that his left shoulder wasn’t supposed to hurt when he moved.

Not to mention that Kotoko was gone. She had probably fled the battle.

But the turning point had come. The Saint Murralsee tried to smash a part of the floor where Komaru and Fukawa stood when the latter threw a scissor blade at it. The blade clanged against the fist, leaving a tiny scar, before Smells Like Teenage Spirit activated.

The entire right side of the Saint Murralsee's left fist burst open in a large cut. The fists momentum slowed and left its eyes exposed for a blast from Komaru's Hacking Gun. She had been able to hit tiny targets on regular Murralsee in one shot before; this one was no problem.

Rohan tried to move in for support when he was pulled back by his foot. No. Not pulled back. Held down. The explosion from Killer Queen's bomb had caused his foot to be trapped by rubble!

"I should have just wiped the three of you out in that fucking subway. I should have just killed that damn machine, when I had the chance." Kira gritted those words through his teeth. Hatred poured from closed eyelids and went straight towards Rohan. Kira pointed at him and was screaming at the top of his lungs. "Nothing will stop me from living a peaceful life!"

"The only stopping that was yourself." Rohan laid his emotions bare for this one. "It really pisses me off to see inconsistent villains. You say you want a peaceful and normal life, but then you go around killing innocents and taking their hands. You say you hate Dio and Monaca, but you were their best minion in all this. Yoshikage Kira, you were defeated in the old world, and you'll be defeated here."

"Shut the hell up about your dumb manga shit!" Kira howled, as Killer Queen threw out its left hand. Sheer Heart Attack shot out and Rohan prepared himself for the worst.

It was only when Kotoko gasped and Sheer Heart Attack made a sharp turn to Rohan's left that he realised who the target was.

Fukawa was standing behind Komaru, holding onto her back, and the two were rising into the air. The taser and Hacking Gun together were generating an electrical pulse strong enough to destroy the Saint Murralsee in one blast. But it was also luring in Kira's Stand!

"Shit! Rohan struggled all he could but his foot just wouldn't move. He had to summon Heaven's Door quick! Only he stopped himself when he caught sight of someone just up ahead.

Specifically, the gun in her hand aimed right where Sheer Heart Attack was flying towards.

"The kind of guy who's a total pervert but hides it and acts like he's so much better than everyone else." Kotoko Utsugi's glare was worthy of its own manga panel. The hatred, betrayal, and raw anger soaking every word. "I really hate guys like that!"

Sheer Heart Attack was indestructible. Nothing could destroy it.
What Kotoko's denture-gun could do, however, was throw the Stand just slightly off-course. Not a great deal. But ever so slightly.

The Stand, for example, could have its path altered so that it fell to the right of Komaru and Fukawa, who continued to rise into the sky. It could fall and be lured towards where the Saint Murralsee's injured fist was slowly beginning to catch fire.

Fire that lured the Stand in just close enough to activate it.

"Look over here!"

The explosion rocked the entire roof. Komaru and Fukawa were almost thrown back until Komaru summoned We Built This City to catch them, also giving Fukawa a vantage point to leap up from, stabilising their jump. Their auras ignited and merged as one, creating a yellow shroud of light that bathed them and almost seemed to be keeping them in the air.

Kotoko was blown back down towards a hole in the ceiling and the rocks holding Rohan in place flew off. He was free! Free to move and charge ahead towards the hole on the floor keeping him from Kira.

The shockwave from Sheer Heart Attack had done more than force Kira to take a few steps back. The wind slamming against his eyes forced him to open them, if only for a second, and gave Rohan the added strength to go just that bit further in his jump.

Rohan didn't care if he missed the landing. All that mattered was that Kira, in his brief second of sight, saw the pattern that Rohan was drawing.

"Goodbye, Yoshikage Kira." Rohan said. That look of horror on the face of Haiji Towa, stolen from him for Yoshikage Kira's own purposes, told him that he had won. "Just like you were before, you were a cancer that only destroyed. This time, you're not coming back in any world."

Heaven's Door tore Kira's face open and scribbled down its commands on the pages; the commands that would seal Killer Queen forever and end this battle.

_I will not harm Rohan Kishibe nor anyone else in any way._

"N-no," Kira knew what that command meant; the tears ran down his eyes, but Rohan held no pity. "Damnit!" He screamed, as Heaven's Door wrote down three more commands.

_Fly towards the Saint Murralsee at 70mph. I will not move from where I land. I will go to Hell when I die._

Kira flew towards the Saint Murralsee, while Rohan scrambled his arms looking for a place to grab onto. His left palm was sliced, and his shoulder cracked, but he managed to latch onto a nearby ledge. Heaven's Door wasn't strong, but it still gave him enough to put another hand up to get himself out.

The Hime Hand Killer wasn't as lucky. He slammed against the chest of the Saint Murralsee full-force, likely breaking more than a few bones, and couldn't move from his spot. Try as he might, he would never escape. Like a plant, he was bound to the dirt where he made himself home.

"Get off me!" The Saint Murralsee screamed. Screaming was all it had left when its enemies were no
longer in its reach.

Rohan looked up to see the true beacons of hope shining brightly. Komaru and Fukawa aimed their weapons straight at the Saint Murralsee.

"Komaru and I aren't alone anymore. So long as we have each other-so long as we have the bonds of friendship-we will never be yours to command, Dio!" Fukawa screamed those words, but even Rohan could hear her next words, even as a whisper. "This is my Hope."

"And it's my Hope as well." Komaru said. Fukawa tightened her hug as both girls stared down the two greatest evils Rohan had ever seen. "Dio! This isn't the story of how you return and reach Heaven! Yoshikage Kira! This isn't the story of how a murderer can live a peaceful life! This is the story of a girl trapped by both evil and her own weakness and has to find the courage to fight for herself."

"The story of a girl, bitter and friendless, who learns to reach out to others and fight for them." Fukawa cried out.

"The story of a man who accepts that what he knew is no longer there." Rohan swallowed those words down. He had to accept what had happened. "But he fights anyway! Because the principles he lives by live on. The messages he tries to get across are still real. That there are still people out there who wish to see the stories of his heart and soul!"

Komaru Naegi. Touko Fukawa. Rohan Kishibe. These three were never who you would call heroes. Your average manga-reader would probably judge them as side-characters designed to make the main character look better, or have their virtues emphasised.

But this was not an average manga! This was the tale of how these three stood up and saved a city! Saved the world even!

The three of them looked past Yoshikage Kira. They looked past the Saint Murralsee. They looked to the future.

"Our stories live on!" All three cried out, as Komaru and Fukawa unleashed their blast.

The blue sphere of energy flew forward and crashed against the face of the Saint Murralsee. The neck of the machine fired out a blast of steam and smoke, the body shook and quivered, before flames burst out from its joints. A furious high-itched warbled scream came out from the speakers as the Saint Murralsee seemed so close to its destruction.

The head fired off the body and shot towards the sky, leaving its torso to burst into white-hot flames that swallowed it whole.

"Damnit! How could this be? Fate was on my side! It's always been on my side!" Kira howled to the skies as explosions consumed his body.

So it was that Yoshikage Kira; the killer who wanted a normal life, died in one of the most elaborate and public ways possible. All eyes were on him as the flames devoured him and every last trace of him was destroyed. There would be nothing left but the eternal memory of the Hime Hand Killer.

The murderer destroyed by the same method by which he killed.
That left the final fragment of a conqueror who refused to accept that he had failed.

"No! This cannot happen to me. I am Dio!" The head cried out as it flew higher and higher, smashing through the clouds and leaving a hole in the darkness above. "I am Dio!"

Those were the head's final words before a distant, but loud, explosion could be heard hundreds of feet in the air. Nothing came down from the sky, apart from a tiny object from afar. As it fell down, Rohan barely recognised the ash-covered face of Murray from the flashes of blue.

Komaru and Fukawa descended onto the ground, their yellow aura fading away, as the former seemed shocked. Had she really not noticed?

Oh well. Maybe Rohan was being too harsh on her. They had won, after all.

They really did win, didn't they?

*We did it. We saved the city.* Rohan forced himself to meet the girls halfway on the roof. The three of them stared at one another; as if unwilling to say anything lest something terrible happened. It was after the Saint Murralsee, without a body, tilted back and collapsed onto the ground that Komaru laughed. Then Fukawa joined. Then even Rohan laughed too.

It lasted about five seconds before someone ruined it.

The chorus of moans and swears from below could be heard from the height of Towa Hills. The adults, made blood-thirsty by their experiences, hadn't cared that Kira was a killer, worked for Dio, and murdered Haiji. All they knew was that the status quo would continue.

After all Komaru did for them, they were actually cursing her.

"Ungrateful bastards." Rohan muttered. He'd bet ten thousand Yen that his editor was down there too.

Fukawa joined in the grumbling while Komaru just shrugged her shoulders as if she didn't care. Sometimes, Rohan could be frustrated with that main-character trait. She wasn't Goku, for crying out loud.

Not to mention that Kotoko was gone. She probably went down to face off against Monaca.

Rohan forced himself to breathe in and out. He needed to learn how to just accept that a win was a win. Just look at the sky! The darkness and blood-red stains were already starting to fade!

"You did it, Komaru. You actually beat Dio's plan." Fukawa said. She almost sounded in awe.

"We did it. Together, we did it." Komaru put away her Hacking Gun and smiled at the two of them. She breathed and the soft smile gave way to firm determination. "Let's finish this bizarre story."

Rohan smirked. "I suppose the author can't disagree with the main character."

The three walked back the way they came, where they would find Monaca or her corpse. Rohan lingered back enough to give Komaru and Fukawa some privacy, as they talked about certain personal details. It wasn't like he had any urgent needs.
His life had revolved about finishing his manga for so long and it wasn't at risk. The Kawajiris had his manga and Shingetsu had said that the tunnel exit was close to a Future Foundation base. *Bloody Games* would be published safely.

If he wanted, he could go his separate ways from the two girls and get back to finishing Pink Dark Boy.

_Not like I'll need to worry about that though. Finishing Pink Dark Boy? When I've got so many ideas left? Idiocy. Rohan Kishibe isn't going to let writer's block defeat him.* Rohan scoffed at the thought. The ideas of the next Part were already coming to him. There were so many problems with his writing in the old world that he never fixed, and new ones he developed. He'd need to show his readers that he could be trusted again!

Rohan looked ahead at Komaru and Fukawa. The latter had gone from intolerable to slightly tolerable and the former had proved herself an admirable person. How many people like that had he ignored in his own grief?

How many people could he have inspired while he was busy trying to turn back the clock.

*Koichi, Reimi, everyone, I don't know if you're dead, or if I just got dropped to this world one day. I'll probably never know, but I think I'm stuck here. And I think I'm fine with it now.* Rohan smiled. Not one that was smug, triumphant, had any kind of edge to it. But a soft and sincere one. *So it looks like you'll be waiting a long while for me to head back. Don't worry, I'll be sure to bring my manga with me when I see you again.*

Rohan Kishibe picked up the pace and walked besides his friends towards the end of their adventures. An adventure that had seen him look himself in the mirror and force himself to change. Now they were reaching the happy ending that they had fought so hard for.

And maybe even finding the next adventure on the way.

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"Komaru did all that?" Naegi seemed so mystified by the news.

Togami welcomed the clear blue skies above him. Despair's grip on Towa City was already fleeing and the drugs that his kidnappers used on him were long gone now. His mind was his own again.

_To think that I got caught out by trash like Komaeda.* Togami had to restrain a grimace. The important thing was that they had won, in the end.

"I wouldn't sound too surprised. She is your little sister, after all," Togami said. "Although, We Built This City is an impressive Stand. Could be even better than Livin' On A Prayer."

"Don't need to go that far, Togami." Naegi laughed, bashfully scratching the back of his head. "I know that Komaru said that she'd be staying in the city, and I am proud of her about that, but I was curious about one thing."
"Oh?" Togami raised a single eyebrow, with the appropriate dignity, at Naegi's words.

"Rohan Kishibe. He said that he was staying too, but that he wanted us to transport the copies of his manga that he finished-"

"And the rest of Bloody Games. He was insistent on that." Togami grimaced at the memories of Rohan's little screed. Thirty minutes he had to sit through. "The arrogance of that man. I had to stop myself from grabbing his shirt and shaking him until he ditched the self-import-why are you laughing?"

"Nothing, nothing, I just remembered a joke that one of Kirigiri's people told me." Naegi replied. Togami narrowed his eyes in suspicion as Naegi wisely changed the subject. "Did he mention giving any autographs? I know we didn't part on good terms, only I was kind of hoping he'd give some to a fan?"

"He's actually got readers?" Togami would have thought Rohan was the type to be appreciated after death.

Mostly because then people wouldn't have to deal with his attitude.

"Togami, he's a well-respected mangaka. Yeah, Morioh Town was grim, but maybe his future work will be less gritty. You should have more respect for an artist like that."

"Not Bloody Games." Togami and Naegi both winced at the name of the title. He had no idea on what the plot was-some sort of murder-mystery thing-but the title alone repelled him. "You'll prefer his next Part. At least, that's what he said. Pink Dark Girl. If you really are still into stuff like shonen manga."

"Don't say it like that." Naegi said, nervously laughing at the thought.

If they were back at Hope's Peak, Togami might have followed up with some cutting remarks or a look of mockery. Something to make Naegi feel like a lesser person. But he had changed since then. Byakuya Togami was no longer that kind of person.

Just as Touko Fukawa had changed. He had thought that the best he could have done was to keep Genocider Syo from killing and Fukawa far away from him. She just seemed like a gloomy stalker who had a horrific stench.

Now he saw something in her. A fire behind those eyes and a purpose to her actions. An actual reason for her to stand and fight rather than simply for its own sake. Komaru Naegi had reached her heart somehow and changed her utterly.

The two girls and Rohan Kishibe had become a solid unit. Togami felt no hesitation in leaving Towa City in their capable hands.

Although the future wasn't entirely bright. Darkness laid ahead just as it always seemed to in this world that was half-way between Dio's destruction and the Future Foundation's reconstruction. The price for this victory had almost been too high.

"The Stand Arrow was probably destroyed in the air-ship. That, or one of Dio's minions took it with them." Togami said, the mood between him and Naegi shifting. There was a steel in his friend now. "Rohan says that he left his Stand Arrow in a private bank vault. The only problem is that it's
underground, filled with rubble, and there's still a small army of Murralsee there. It's going to be months before they can come close to getting it; if it's even intact."

"We'll just have to count on them to find it. Once they do..." Naegi trailed off. "We'll make sure it goes to the right people."

And how many of the right people were in the Future Foundation? Togami knew the score. Makoto Naegi was accepted as a banner and a spokesman, but little else. There were too many soldiers who saw the Class 78 survivors as having weapons they didn't deserve. They blamed Naegi for not securing the Arrow.

*Having seen some of their Branch Heads, I'm not sure they'd be able to survive having a Stand.* Togami doubted that even those that could withstand the Arrow's cut were entirely deserving of it.

They at least weren't Ultimate Despair. Dio's followers had gone underground a few months after Dio’s death and no one knew why. It was good for the stability of the world, but it was already causing arguments within the Future Foundation. Without the common enemy, everyone was picking fights with each other.

That wasn't the only problem they had in store.

"We've also got to tell Asahina and Hagakure about their relatives," Togami said. Naegi's expression dropped and he was barely meeting Togami's eyes. "Do you want me to assist or-"

"No. They should hear it as soon as they can. Asahina and Hagakure deserve to know what happened to their loved ones, even if it'll be painful at first." Naegi said. He breathed and the regret on his face was obvious. "I keep wondering if I should have come with you."

"You'd have been a target. For the Warriors of Hope and everyone else in that city. Yoshikage Kira would have eaten you alive. Dio too." Togami was almost too blunt in his words.

They were too lucky that Komaru Naegi had overcome his influence. If she hadn't stopped him, even if Naegi was there to help, Togami doubted that the world could have survived. Yoshikage Kira had been another unwelcome anomaly. His pursuit in avoiding justice had cost far too many lives.

"Even when he's dead, Dio's causing trouble." Naegi's face toughened. The resolve that Togami saw at Hope's Peak came to him. "But next time. Next time something like this happens, I'm going straight in. I can't keep standing back while everyone else is fighting."

"I know you will." Togami smiled and looked up at the helicopter approaching the airfield. The escort he was meant to take only days ago. "I'll see you back at base. There are some other conditions I need to explain. We're going to have to set-up a supply point in this city for it and I don't trust you with the administration."

It was to Naegi's embarrassed face that Togami ended their call. Togami would never admit it, or he'd never hear the end of it, but it was nice to have spoken with one of his friends again. The few lucid moments of that constant mist he was trapped in, unable to use Gold to free himself, had been ruled by fear.

Fear of never escaping or of being used as some propaganda tool by Ultimate Despair. A trophy at best and an example to be set at worst.
The rescue attempt itself could have used a lot more work than Rohan Kishibe giving Togami a strict list of demands and instructions to follow. The indignity of a Togami being given commands by some mangaka was almost too much. The fact that obeying these orders was inscribed by Heaven's Door itself made it even worse.

Rohan Kishibe was clearly (overly) passionate about his manga. The second he learnt that the manga industry outside Towa City was capable of publishing again, he was a leech to flesh on Togami's shirt. It took all of Gold and We Built This City's combined strength to finally wrench him off.

"And it has to be adapted for a monthly release-schedule." He said, ignoring Komaru's scolding about personal space. "If civilisation is really functioning again then there is absolutely no reason that distribution should be too badly hurt. I refuse to be cut off from my readers just because of poor infrastructure on the Future Foundation's part, and also..."

He's your problem now, Komaru Naegi. Togami sighed. If it were anyone but Komaru Naegi, he'd have put good money on her losing patience and throwing Rohan down a river. He didn't completely line out Fukawa doing just that in a week's time.

The sun shined down as the sound of the helicopter drew closer. Togami looked back at Towa City and knew for a fact that it was in safe hands. There was still going to be strife and bloodshed, too many had died for it to be otherwise, but Hope would shine through.

Togami left Towa City knowing that a great victory was won here today.

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The sun beat down as a single figure stalked down to the northern docks. He did not strike an inspiring impression; short even if he weren't hunching and panting as he lugged a leaking jar filled with preserving fluids down a barren road. The Arrow tied behind his back might have helped, if it didn't otherwise highlight his feeble figure.

The lack of sleep hadn't helped. They arrived in the middle of the night and spent most of the early morning searching under a pitch-black sky through rubble and ruins. It was only because of their partner that they remained safe against the Murralsee or the adults.

Not that the sounds of death helped his posture any. Even after the Tragedy; he still wasn't used the sounds of death and suffering.

At least he was safe from being discovered. He hadn't spent hours hiding away for nothing. The helicopter carrying Togami was long out of sight, making it safe for him to move, and no one would bother him with Pet Shop to help.

At least one thing would go right today.

"This is all my fault." The last friend of Dio Brando said. He had to fight to keep himself from crying out of shame. "I shouldn't have hedged my bets. I should have been here to keep Monaca in check. Keep them all united."
Pet Shop stayed on his shoulder as he walked down to the docks. It had been a small relief that he was able to make his way onto the usual Future Foundation drop-off point. It was a only a miracle that made him be the first to reach the Vizier's body.

This wasn't meant to be what happened.

Izuru Kamukura was carting the heads of Murray and the Vizier off to who knows where; Monaca and Komaeda were missing; and now it fell to him to get Dio out of there.

"The Vizier should have taken better care of you. Fighting the three of them wasn't needed. It wasn't like Monaca or the Vizier really needed to engage in battle." He laughed to himself as he realised who he was talking about. "But he wouldn't have been a part of you if he didn't like his theatrics."

Dio was always like that. Why use fireworks when you could use a bomb? Not like him, all meek and small and barely able to fight. His Stand was worthless out here in the open. No possible way for him to reach the outside world.

He looked down on Dio's head. The hard glass had managed to hold up somewhat, with only a light crack from the bottom left curling around to the back top part, letting the green preserving liquid slowly seep out. It was already on his hands as he moved the jar towards the boat.

That's where he needed to get to. The men and women guarding that ship were his and his alone. They'd draw their weapons on Kyosuke Munakata and Kazuo Tengan themselves if he ordered them to. Not that there was any need to.

The head itself was in ruins, and not only because of its prior condition.

He barely managed to save it from Ultimate Despair. The body had been picked clean; stripped of organs and appendages, and not even the head had been safe. There was no eye under one of the closed eyelids, incisors had been ripped out, and his flesh had already been rotting when he had been put in the jar.

*I'm sorry. It was the best I could do.* He hoped that his words could reach his friend. Pet Shop turned its head to the right and squawked whenever he went too fast. When the spirit of his friend was suffering or needed to catch up.

Just what had We Built This City done to him?

"I've been a coward. You told me that I was strong, that I was worthy to be at your side, but was I really?" He asked, referring to both Dio and himself. "I let you go into that Killing Game alone. I wasn't there for the final battle. I let the Warriors of Hope destroy themselves for you. Now? Now I'm letting Kamukura decide the fates of-

He couldn't say the words. He didn't deserve to say those words.

"Not anymore." He said to himself. "I can't keep relying on others. Relying on you. You said that we were partners. That we should reach Heaven and create a world of Hope. Well then, I guess it's time I helped create it."

Ultimate Despair would have one final chance. They would be the ones to offer their bodies to Dio and assist him in taming the Future Foundation and beginning plans to resurrect Dio once more. He prayed that they would be successful.
It was a terrible thing. Wishing away someone's identity. It was practically a sin.

But Heaven would wash away the sins. All the evil that had been done, along with the Despair it caused, would be erased and leave nothing but hope.

"I have a plan, Dio." He whispered to the jar containing his friend's head. "It's a last resort. If everyone else falls. If I'm the only one left, then I'll do it. I'll throw myself into Hell so that you can return to Earth and bring Heaven. Because it'll be worth it."

He sighed to himself while Pet Shop tightened its grip. Was Dio's spirit in pain right now? The spirit seemed to need to be close to the body to maintain its form. Or maybe Pet Shop felt the agony of being trapped. Both the hawk and its master loved being able to roam free.

I'm sorry you have to suffer like this. But please, give me more time. He inwardly begged.

"It's almost finished. I remember when it was just a couple of ideas that I put pen to paper on. You thought it was stupid until you saw it," How long ago was it before he met Dio? Before the two of them became friends? It felt like a lifetime ago. It was a lifetime ago. "I just need to add in the final touches and it'll be done."

Heaven. A place where everyone would feel peace of mind. Free to march down the path of their Fate without uncertainty. Uncertainty of themselves; of their loved ones; and of the world around them. The fear and anger that created Despair would be no more.

It would be a world where no one would suffer. Where no one would be sad. Where no one would be betrayed. Where no one would be in pain or conflict. A world of peace without war.

He held the jar up so that Dio's face was aligned with his own and dipped his forehead closer. The cold touch of the glass made him shiver.

Not like when they were together. Dio always held him close to his warmth in the old days. Whispered of how beautiful he was and how amazing his Talent was. The power that had saved Dio himself from Despair and brought him peace of mind.

In turn, he had shown all the horrors of the old world. He showed how he needed to be stronger and that humans could not overcome Despair on their own. Nor would they choose a world of Hope compared to comfortable stagnation. Not everyone could be like Naegi, or his little sister.

What had been done to the Warriors of Hope was more than enough for him to realise how necessary Dio was for Hope. No matter how painful it was for him to have been a part of the Tragedy. To have let Dio do what he did to so many innocent people.

Pet Shop spread its wings and flew off his shoulder and up towards the sky.

"The world of hope we dreamed of is coming, Dio." He smiled to himself. "I even came up with a name for it. You always said I should think of the useless details last, but I couldn't resist. It needed to be something that spoke to our journey. From that street in Tokyo, to Hope's Peak, to even now. I don't know if you can understand me, let alone hear me, but I promise you. Heaven will come and you will be there to see it."

He began to walk forward once more. It was a long way to go and he was carrying a heavy load, but
he kept on moving anyway.

"The Eyes of Heaven, Dio." He grunted the words out as he let the jar lower, so he wouldn't drop it. "They'll bring about the world we wanted-want to create."

And so he moved towards the ship that would take him and Dio out of this cursed city. It would take them back to his Division's HQ where he could put Dio under real treatment. Where he could finish the work that would bring Hope to every man, woman, and child on the planet.

Ryota Mitarai wouldn't let his friend down again.

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Komaru Naegi boldly stepped out from the hotel where the group had slept the night and breathed in the air. It wasn't clean-too much dust from the rubble-but it was better than it was yesterday. She walked forward with purpose and determination, for she had a task to complete today, and she was gonna do it.

Hope was rushing up her gut and she just couldn't contain herself. Any good leader had to show great enthusiasm to inspire their soldiers and Komaru was no different. It was time for the morning roll-call.

With Touko and Rohan just behind her on her left and right respectively, she felt like they could take on the whole world.

"Towa City Rescue Team Roll-Call." Komaru looked up to the sky, hands on her sides, and was shouting at the top of her voice. "Komaru Naegi!"

"This is dumb."

"Touko!" Komaru turned her head and pouted. Touko promised she'd play along!

"Grr." Touko's grimace was the price to pay for her raising her left hand up. "Touko Fukawa." She droned.

"..."

"Rohan-sensei!" She worked so hard on this!

"I refuse."

"Then you're not knowing what I thought of Pink Dark Boy Part II." Komaru didn't think she'd have to use such extreme measures.

"Rohan Kishibe!" Rohan raised his right hand.

"Oingo!" The elder brother cried out from Fukawa's left.
"Boingo!" The younger brother shouted from Rohan's right. This was more like it!

"Go team!" Komaru's cry was joined in on by the Oingo Boingo Brothers. She turned back to see two energetic and two grumpy faces. "See, didn't that get you guys all pumped up for the day ahead?"

Touko and Rohan just kept glaring at her with bags under their eyes. Maybe it was a lack of sleep that was making them like this. Or them just not feeling the positive mood. Oh well. They'd learn to like it.

Komaru had never been gladder that Zenyetta and Mondatta had joined up with them. The Resistance had mostly gone back underground or were roaming around, fighting with the Murralsee, and without Hiroko or Kira, there was no one else to protect Boingo.

Tohth and Khnum had been great Stands to have on the team and the brothers were great company. Komaru wasn't saying that just because they voted her as leader or anything.

Yet her attention fell on her best friend, who was barely keeping in a big yawn.

"Touko, you seem tired. Didn't you get enough sleep last night?" Komaru asked. She was sure that they went to bed at the same time last night.

"How could I when you were snoring and hogging the covers?" Touko snapped.

"I don't snore!" Komaru's pride gave way to reality on the second point. "But maybe I do take a tiny bit more of the sheets than I should." She regained her spirits, however. "There were plenty of other rooms in the hotel, y'know. We don't have to share the same bed."

"How can I leave you alone when there are gh-ghosts out there?!" Touko couldn't keep the fear out of her voice for that one. "I-I mean, they might seduce you. Just like you almost ran off with Dio."

Touko had a slight blush on her face and a familiar leer came to her. "I hear you talk in your sleep. Those ghosts might be able to shape-shift, 'cause I heard of lot of moaning for 'Big Bro Makoto'."

"Smut author." Rohan muttered.

"Doujin peddler." Touko snapped.

"It wasn't like that, Touko." Komaru said. Okay, Dio might have gotten a bit touch-y, but she definitely wasn't having dreams about Makoto! Gah! She turned her attention to Rohan. "What about you, Rohan-sensei?" She asked.

That managed to set him off.

"How could I sleep? All it does is re-charge the body and mind. How could I need re-charging when I've been filled with inspiration? How can I waste eight hours each day when I could be finishing the next chapter of my latest masterpiece?" Rohan's words shot through Komaru before she could even understand the first sentence. "Would you stop Leonardo Da Vinci from painting the Mona Lisa? No! So I have to do what I can to perfect this Part. After I disgraced myself with those last two parts, I need to gain the trust of my readers again!"

"I can't believe you won't let me read it." Komaru had finally committed to reading some of Rohan's stuff and now she couldn't even read the new stuff.
He was so mean, even when he was being really nice.

Rohan calmed down at that. "I want you to become familiar with my writing and art-style. This is Rohan Kishibe re-introducing himself to a world he rejected until now. Besides, I want to know what you think of my evolution as an artist." His words had a softness to them, although his face sharpened when Touko scoffed at it.

"Yeah, 'sorry kids, I used to be sad-crazy, now I'm happy-crazy. Here's some big-boobed ladies to'-Ah!" Touko was cut off by Rohan pinching her right cheek.

"That's too bad about not being allowed to read it. I saw a bit with my own eyes! And Tohth let me see some more. It was really cool." Boingo said, smiling up at her. It was nice to have someone be positive for more than ten seconds! "Gorgeous Irene looked just like you, Komar-Gah!" Rohan had grabbed Boingo's left cheek now.

"Hey, you better get your hands off my brot-Damnit!" Heaven's Door was getting involved now! A double cheek-pinch!

This was the only downside to the Towa City Rescue Team. Everyone was basically five seconds and a split-decision away from getting distracted. Komaru included. But this was turning into a disaster. Komaru had to restore order and do it fast!

"Everyone!" Her shout managed to get their attention again. They were faced with a frown and Komaru's best impression of her mother when she was telling them off. "We're wasting daylight. Come on. The report said that there were some kids trapped by the Art Museum and they're scared. If we don't move, some adults might find them, or even Murralsee. If we're quick; maybe we'll drop off Rohan-sensei's latest stuff to the Future Foundation."

She got four grumbles of agreement and took that as an enthusiastic 'yes ma'am'. Komaru looked back towards the street where the Art Museum was, a mere thirty-minute walk away, and marched forward with purpose. The others quickly trailed behind her and walked ahead as well. They were even matching her pace! Before they then went ahead of her.

\textit{H-hey. Don't walk so fast.} Komaru wasn't making this a race! Okay, maybe she could try walking with less purpose and more movement, but still! The leader shouldn't have to be wailing for their followers to let them catch up!

Towa City only needed one look to be called a dead place. Why wouldn't it be? The streets were barren where they weren't stained with blood and ruins, there was no sound other than a few cries from birds and the Rescue Team themselves. Where was the life?

Living. That's where it was. There were lives filled with fear and panic for the future. Lives filled with anger and hate for the past. But it was life still. A life that could be helped and cured of its despair. Every child that they saved. Every adult they stopped from giving into despair or a warped hope. That was a life saved.

Komaru Naegi stayed in this city because otherwise it would die. It would die a slow and painful and meaningless death. Here, she could keep the Future Foundation from getting too involved. Keeping this 'Ultimate Despair' from wreaking havoc. So long as she and the others fought, there was hope.

To the protests, but not refusal, of Touko and Rohan, Komaru took their hands and held them as the
team walked down the road. Just as she'd help Touko with the challenges her friend couldn't face, Touko would help Komaru with the challenges she couldn't face. With Rohan, she'd be the constant reminder that life didn't end with one world.

The three friends were ready for the day ahead.

**Monaca Towa**/She Sells Sanctuary: Retired
**Dio Brando**/Holy Diver*: Exorcised
**Yoshikage Kira**/Killer Queen & Sheer Heart Attack: Dead

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**Stand Stats**

**We Built This City**
**User:** Komaru Naegi

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: C
- Range: C
- Durability: A
- Precision: C
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**

Creates shield around user that cannot be penetrated but user cannot escape from. At full-power, the Shield is air-tight and even outlasts user itself. Stand can be deployed towards those within 10m range of user but must be de-activated if already in use.

Stand can render user immune to 'abnormal infections' directly or indirectly from Stands. Does not apply to injuries of such kind applied 'normally', even when from Stands. Requires at least partial concentration.

Stand can negate 'abnormal infection' directly or indirectly from Stands that apply to inanimate objects and others using ahoge to fire a straight beam. Range is equal to a pistol and applies to the first object it touches. Ahoge can detach and serve as firearm. Effect of abnormality must be considered 'harmful'.
Kyouko Kirigiri didn't consider herself an elitist.

She had high standards, but didn't judge others for failing to meet them unless they had to do with character and actions. Wealth and luxury rarely decided moral worth. All it really determined was the material quality of their gifts, which made little difference outside of coffee.

But even she had to admit that it wasn't nice to be sitting next to a fidgety Aoi Asahina on a plane stuffed with bodyguards, after an entire day of going in, out, and sitting through flights.

"Do you think he'll have a pool?" Asahina asked in what was her seventh question now. "Oh, maybe they'll have donuts in Italy!"

"That's not our concern. We're primarily here for business, Asahina." Kirigiri said. The stricken look on her friend's face made her change tack. "But yes, there could be a swimming pool for you and Italy will likely have donuts."

Why wouldn't they? It's one of the few fully-functioning states in the world. There was the United States, Japan, and a handful of other counties which included Italy, as far as Kirigiri knew. Some nations were unaccounted for.

Dio didn't have to leave Hope's Peak to destroy the world. His followers in Ultimate Despair were more than happy to spread destruction in his name. They were mostly made up of the Reserve Course, but the true leaders were the former Class 77-B.

The Tragedy had started with the Parade at Hope's Peak and sparked off a thousand other incidents. It was like wild-fire, after seeing the world's hopes destroyed. Entire nations burnt.

It didn't help that states like Novoselic and organisations like the Kuzuryu Gang went rogue.

The Future Foundation did what it could, but they were fighting against Stand users. The best they could do was hit-and-run attacks on single members of Class 77-B, and only have large-scale battles with the soldiers.

Dio's death in the Mutual Killing Game had turned the tide. Many of his followers either committed suicide, surrendered, or went underground. But tensions were still bubbling. Not everyone believed in the Future Foundation, and not everyone had abandoned former loyalties.

It was why they were on a flight all the way to Rome itself to speak to Giorno Giovanna himself. Kirigiri and Asahina being two-thirds of the main negotiators.

"For what it's worth, I'm glad you're here with me, but I was expecting your superior." Kirigiri
"Didn't you hear? They've been removed. Corruption, inactivity, and suspected links to the Towa Group. Real jerk." Asahina said. Kirigiri wasn't surprised. The Future Foundation was supposed to be the world's hope, but it didn't take long to find the hidden darkness.

"We'll just have to gamble that Giorno Giovanna doesn't take offence to us only sending two Branch Heads and a representative. Mob bosses are rarely rational on honour." Kirigiri had her experience with big-time criminals. If the memories were taking their time returning.

She only remembered her mother's face just last week.

Asahina crossed her arms and grumbled into her seat. "Can't believe we're making a deal with a crime boss. It's just wrong."

Kirigiri sympathised. As a detective, if one that prioritised the truth, she had an instinctive sense of justice. One that was firmly against making deals with criminals, especially on a large-scale like this.

Yet she had to have faith in Tengan. He had pushed this through against a lot of objections on the faith that this would win over Valentine. They were already sending diplomats to the US, yet this was the next big diplomatic offensive.

They had to show that their enemy was Despair, not people who could challenge their authority. Munakata and Sakakura, Heads of the 2nd and 6th Division, and normally advocates of 'hard' solutions, had strangely been against this.

Although that only makes it an argument for making a deal. Those two are zealots. Jealous ones at that. Kirigiri didn't trust that their objections were to do with morality. They were against any deal that weakened the Future Foundation, so long as Ultimate Despair still existed.

What choice did they have? Italy was almost fully-functioning again under the rule of Giovanna and his crime-lord underlings. The elections there only happened because of his oversight.

There were some admirable features as well. Human trafficking, a popular business in a world of Despair, was practically wiped out as were drug sales to children. There was crime, and certainly legalisation of certain former crimes that Kirigiri disapproved of, but Giovanna was not entirely Despair.

"They say he's like a dark angel. Triumphed over the previous head of Passione and forged it anew." Kirigiri said. Asahina didn't seem convinced.

"He better not be one of those Scarface kind-of guys. Otherwise he's gonna get a face-full of The Ocean." Asahina's Stand manifested behind her as she spoke. It had its arms crossed and the fluids inside it were bubbling. It only stopped when Asahina's eyes widened and she turned from her seat, looking down the aisle through a mass of heads belonging to their guards. "Where's the other Branch Head?"

"Currently handling flight-sickness. For the fifth flight now." They had to make multiple flights from Japan, the latest from Cairo, and their partner hadn't taken any of them well.

"Ugh! All these flight-changes. I could have swam to Rome at this rate." Asahina said, slumping against her seat.
From Cairo? Kirigiri didn't deny it. The Ocean had turned Asahina from an Olympic-tier swimmer to an underwater torpedo. But then she'd have to move Kirigiri, their bodyguards, and the other Branch Head.

Ultimate Despair was another problem. They had gone underground but the Stand users were still out there. Kirigiri preferred avoiding a fight when she could, especially when there were stories of them re-emerging in what was once Novoselic.

Maybe they're trying for the same thing we're doing. Seeing if Giovanna is an enemy or a friend. Kirigiri didn't want to think about the thought of Giorno Giovanna aligning itself with Ultimate Despair. There were even stories that the man himself was a Stand user. If he joined with them...

Kirigiri didn't want to think about the body-count in such a case.

"Do you believe that we can trust him? That Giorno Giovanna won't side with Despair." She asked. Asahina could be direct, but she was more trusting than others. The fact that she was biting her lip didn't inspire confidence though.

"I don't know. The guy is ruling Italy with an iron-fist... and he's a criminal! Maybe it'll be in his nature to side with despair." She replied.

"No," A voice cut through and both Kirigiri and Asahina turned to their partner for this trip.

Ryota Mitarai wasn't what you'd call an inspiring figure. He was as tall as Naegi but he looked starved in his suit where Naegi could fill his out, with hazel eyes (Kirigiri noting the thick bags under them) and light-brown hair that went down to his neck. A slight breeze could tip him over.

Yet there was passion to his denial. A faith in this man who he had never met before that almost matched Naegi's optimism.

She and Asahina undid their seat-belts to fully turn and face Mitarai from their seats. His strength faded quickly under the force of Asahina's confused look. The guards looked forward without reaction.

"I-I mean, h-he may be a criminal, but we shouldn't judge. We don't know why he went down that path. T-Touko Fukawa is Genocider Syo, isn't she?"

"Those are different personalities," Kirigiri said, with slightly more force than necessary. She felt compelled to defend Fukawa's name. "Unless Giovanna has a different identity he is trying to keep secret, his character remains at least partially suspect."

"He's stopped drug sales to children, he's keeping order, and he's refused to try and become some kind of new Caesar. Passione's become the only thing keeping Italy from Despair again." Mitarai replied, although he wasn't looking her in the eye. After a few quick breaths, however, he found his courage again and met her stare. "I believe that Giorno Giovanna won't turn to Despair. If anything, he'll side with Hope."

"A mob boss? Really?" Asahina asked. It was easy to forget that Mitarai was a Branch Head; a fact Asahina only remembered after Kirigiri helpfully coughed to remind her. The Ultimate Swimmer clapped her hands together and bowed her head. "I'm sorry! That was disrespectful, Mister Mitarai, sir! Please don't punish me."
"Ah-P-Please stop that. It's r-really kind of embarrassing." Mitarai somehow made himself look smaller and more bashful. He stared at the ground. "I don't even know why Tengan wanted to send me. You guys are the ones with the Stands."

"Maybe he had faith in you. There can be those around you who treat you with the respect a Branch Head deserves." Kirigiri said.

"My Division respects me fine!" He insisted, his face going red.

"I was talking about your pet."

Mitarai blushed even more. It was one of the worst-kept secrets in the Future Foundation that Mitarai's pet falcon only tolerated him for the sake of food and letting it fly free. It was more than most people got; which was pecking, clawing, and screeching and not necessarily in that order.

"He's kind of a grump, but he's had it rough. Once you get to know him, he can show a soft side. And he's really protective." Mitarai said, defending his bird's honour.

She'd take his word for it. There wasn't much time to argue anyway, as the lights above dinged to indicate that they should get their seat-belts back on, since they'd be arriving in Rome soon. A united front on Giovanna was needed, even if it didn't exist.

Tengan's instructions were clear. If they couldn't at least get an agreement to either join or align with the Future Foundation, they were to keep him from forming an alliance with President Valentine or Ultimate Despair. No cost would be too great.

There was the secret instruction -kept from Munakata's intrusive eyes- to investigate Giovanna and his council personally. To find out if they really were Stand users.

Is it true? Does the New Caesar of Rome have a Stand? Kirigiri had been waiting to use Detective Man for something more than just pure combat. It'd have to wait a while longer. Interrogation will have to come after diplomacy. The key is keeping him on the side of Hope.

Could a criminal, someone who broke the law, be a symbol of Hope? Could a law really be broken when the world was in chaos? Would Giorno Giovanna be an ally of Hope, or a servant of Despair?

Kirigiri guessed she'd find out in Rome.

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"This is first-class?" Byakuya Togami gave the infamous Togami sneer. "I've been better economy seats on airplanes."

You've actually seen economy seats? Makoto Naegi assumed he saw them while surveying an commercial airline company that his family owned once. Or maybe he was being cynical because he had now lost his bet with Hagakure.

Make the entire trip without Togami being Togami about the travelling arrangements.
It was a doomed hope, in hindsight, and this was the Ultimate Hope saying that. It had been a week long trip from the Future Foundation base in San Diego to the settlement in Danville, Kentucky. A lot of it involved changing trains of varying quality.

One of the prices of moving around in a rebuilding country as large as America was that it was inconsistent. Some parts were almost at pre-Tragedy levels, mostly the West and East Coast. Others, however, were only starting to recover and the Mid-West had become the Wild West.

Part of why Naegi was here was to convince the President to let the Future Foundation help.

Funny Valentine. That's a pretty weird name. He'd just been sworn into office when the Tragedy struck, and was the only head of state to have survived this whole thing. Washington DC was in ruins so he moved himself all across America in secret. Probably has to avoid Ultimate Despair. Everyone's been avoiding them.

They may have gone underground, but the people still feared them. As if they'd return any day now. Rumours of them appearing all across America hadn't helped, nor did the collapse in modern infrastructure in a lot of places.

So that meant being a bit more willing to compromise with methods of transportation.

"Togami, you shouldn't be so negative. The government here were really generous in letting us travel like this." Naegi said.

"You're the Ultimate Hope, Naegi. They'd have given you these seats if you were a brute like none other."

"C-Come on." Naegi shuffled in his seat. He knew it was true but that didn't mean he liked it. "You know I don't like using the title that way."

"You weren't complaining about the fangirls."

"That's different!" Naegi insisted, while Togami just raised an eyebrow.

A few seconds of silence passed before embarrassment became humour for Naegi. He softly laughed as Togami cracked a smile. This picture would have been unthinkable back at Hope's Peak.

Just as Naegi had changed, however, so had Togami. He'd been more willing to put others ahead of himself and was a team-player now. He'd only complained for one week about not being made a Branch Head! That was amazing progress for him.

It was why he was on this trip with Naegi. Munakata had done his best to keep Naegi stuck in Japan -where he'd be a mascot- but he managed to get away. Kirigiri's condition for 'ordering' this mission was that he needed an escort.

Togami volunteered to make sure that nothing happened to him. Naegi might have doubted him; were it not for the many attempts by Ultimate Despair to avenge Dio.

I never realised how many people Dio had under his thumb. It's almost insane. Naegi only had to look outside to see the damage caused. The cities and towns turned to deserts, the fields of skeletons, and the horrific displays that still hadn't been taken down. Yet there were people who didn't just believe in Dio; they worshipped him. They're more slaves than followers.
He was reminded of when Dio brought back his friends with *Holy Diver*. The people they had been classmates and friends with for years, the people Dio killed to break the survivors, were turned into nothing more than mouthpieces. Just a new tactic for him to use to crush their spirits.

Naegi had never been more thankful for *Livin' On A Prayer* than that day. He'd been able to save his friends from an eternity of slavery.

He had put himself on the frontlines that day. With his friends by his side, fighting with him, he managed to stop Dio from destroying the world itself. It was almost shameful to compare it to what he did after that. Letting others do the dirty-work while he was just a pretty-face.

Not anymore. If Komaru had been able to survive Towa City and become its protector, despite everything that had been thrown at her, he could make these small journeys.

Although, there was another reason that he did it. A more personal reason.

"Do you remember that sign we saw? The one just outside of Hope's Peak?" Naegi knew this was coming out of nowhere. Togami looked at him, almost confused by the question.

His first reply with an irritated sigh. "Why? Did Kirigiri want us to check up on it? Naegi, we are not going to try and convert Ultimate Despair here. I don't know how you did it in Australia but they're not like the others." His eyes hardened as he looked at Naegi. "*Livin' On A Prayer* isn't a combat Stand."

"I know, I know. I meant the person it was memorialising." Naegi had some trouble getting the name right. English wasn't his strong point and they had only seen it for a few minutes. "Kirigiri did some research on him. His family's here.."

"That doesn't make sense. The Joestars were British nobility. I suppose if they fled to Kentucky; but then the timing is awfully convenient." Togami said. It was the opposite of what Naegi thought, as Togami's eyes narrowed. "Naegi, we cannot rule out their allegiance to Dio."

Naegi wasn't sure about that. Ultimate Despair were laying tributes, but they weren't all about worshipping Dio. Some were even pretty hopeful! It was the memorial by Dio that made everyone suspicious of him.

*A part of him thought we were his friends too. That's why he didn't just kill us outright*. It didn't mean they were on the same side. Naegi wondered if maybe this guy wasn't an ally of Dio. Maybe he had been in a similar situation as Class 78 had been.

"Whatever it is, they're the last surviving relatives of Class 77-B. Jonathan Joestar's death preceded the Tragedy, right? So maybe they're not loyal to Dio. We won't know until we try." Naegi said. Togami seemed reluctant, yet also unwilling to really fight over it.

"Fine. But I didn't come here just to sight-see. Don't go putting yourself in danger just because you feel sorry for the first person you see. I will not be embarrassed again by your failings." Togami replied, in what was Togami-speak for 'just don't get hurt'.

"Got it." Naegi beamed. Togami looked away and muttered something about him being an idiot.

Naegi knew why his friend was worried. Ultimate Despair were all Stand users and could actually be
gathering in America. Maybe even to take advantage of him leaving Japan. They'd do anything to catch him.

If they did, their punishment would make an Execution from the Mutual Killing Game look like kid's stuff.

But he had to do this. Not only because his presence might finally convince Valentine to accept outside help. This was more personal.

If Jonathan Joestar wasn't Dio's ally then they had to get it on the record. They couldn't let the Future Foundation just write him off as an over-zealous follower who killed himself. If he was killed for opposing Dio, he had to be recognised for it.

His family deserved some closure as well. They probably never discovered what happened to him and wrote him off as dead. Did they even know what the Future Foundation were discussing about him?

Naegi, however, could do something about it, and he'd be a terrible Ultimate Hope if he didn't.

*What's the worst that could happen?* Naegi turned to look out the window, seeing Danville rise in the distance, and smiled. They finally made it. *This is just going to be a short thing. Learn about whether Jonathan Joestar was friends with Dio, meet with Valentine, and then hopefully a deal with the latter and clear the former's name.*

Boring; but Naegi was ready for boring.

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"George, what are you even doing?" Johnny Joestar looked at the baby currently trying to shove its stuffed turtle toy into his mouth.

He'd probably be having some luck if he had teeth to bite through the material.

It shouldn't be Johnny sitting here, watching his baby nephew play with toys in his cot, but Erina and Jonathan. The two were meant to be living the married life back at the Joestar estate and being in their own perfect world. A happy family without any troubles.

It wasn't like their father wouldn't have complained. Jonathan and Erina would have gotten married before she started to show, they could have lied, and it'd just be a case of quick young love. It wasn't like Lord George Joestar would ever suspect anything.

Those kind of pregnancies were for the fuck-up son. The disgraceful bastard. The accident.

A happy gurgle cut off Johnny's thoughts. George, named after his grandfather in memory of Jonathan more than anyone, was gazing up at Johnny with happy little eyes. He liked to be picked up sometimes, but the yawn told him this wasn't one of those times.

He seemed so happy to see his uncle.

*Not if he knew what you said to his dad. Not if he knew what kind of shit you really are.* Johnny
gritted his teeth and had to look away from George. It was bad enough that the kid would never know his Dad. When he was older, he'd know the last words Johnny said to his brother.

Jonathan didn't phrase it right, but any idiot could have realised what he was trying to say. That being unable to walk wasn't the end of his life. That he was free of his previous car-crash lifestyle. That he could grow.

In return, Jonathan just got paranoia and insults.

"So that's it. You're just like him. My wings are nice and clipped so I can be whatever you want." Johnny turned his wheelchair around and tightened his grip on the sides. He knew it. He knew his brother was glad that he got shot, even if the older Joestar hadn't acknowledged it himself. "I bet you're glad I got shot. I wouldn't have to go to Hope's Peak and ruin your little dreams by being a fuck-up."

Jonathan took a step closer. "Jorg-

"Don't call me that!" Johnny refused to look at him. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing him cry. "Just fuck off!" He screamed, fleeing back to his room so that his brother couldn't see the tears.

His older brother left for Japan the next day. He had tried to get Johnny to come out of his room but the former jockey refused. The shame of what he had said was too much. All he got was a 'goodbye' from across the door.

It was the last time the two brothers saw each other before Jonathan's death.

My own brother. He just wanted to reach out and those were my last words to him. Johnny had to stop himself from crying. He didn't want to upset George, who was just about to go to sleep. Johnny staying here would just wake him up. Be a better man than I ever was, George. You got the right blood. All I have is trash in my veins.

They had to flee their home all the way to Kentucky and Johnny had been useless. Jonathan would have helped the family somehow. He'd be able to provide for them instead of relying on Erina making good with what they brought with them.

Speaking of Erina, Johnny decided to see how she was doing. She had him watch George while she dealt with these guests, but he felt like he had to at least listen in. It might have been those jerks trying to extort them for cash again.

The nursery was on the ground floor so it wasn't hard for Johnny to wheel himself to the kitchen where Erina was meeting those two guys. The Joestars had been pretty lucky in the Tragedy. They never had to worry about food or warmth.

If Danville had fallen to Despair, though, they'd not be nearly as well-off as they were.

Johnny managed to get close enough to hear a chair scraping on the floor and hands smacking on the table. The door was slightly ajar which made it a lot easier to listen in on.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to leave," Erina's voice had that chill to it. She only ever used it on people trying to intimidate them out of their home. "There is nothing left for us to discuss."
A male voice, the English almost flawless except for a slight accent, softly carried itself through the air. "Miss Pendleton-

"Mrs Joestar." Erina replied. "You may think what you like about my husband, but I will not hear your slander here."

Johnny got himself closer to the door to peep in on the conversation. There were two people with Erina; one in a suit with blonde hair and a face suited to scowling, and the other in a dark-green hoodie and a total baby-face. They were both Japanese, by the looks of it.

The hoodie-guy looked like he wanted to say something, but his partner took the lead.

"What my friend here is trying to say is that the Future Foundation is considering such a judgement. We're here to prove that he's not-"

"He was a friend to the man he thought Dio Brando was. The man the world thought he was. I could see the hunger, the evil, in his heart but I kept silent thinking that he simply chose to hide it." Erina said. Her voice shook and Johnny kept himself from storming in the room himself. Were they really saying what he thought they were saying? "Jonathan was always a kind man. He saw the best in others and wanted to bring it out from them. Dio abused that trust and..."

"Dio took our friends away as well." The hoodie-guy said. His English was slow compared to his partner, but there was a sincerity in his voice. Johnny swore that he had seen this guy from somewhere. "Whatever he did to your husband, Dio claimed that they were close. We need to have proof otherwise."

"So you're asking me to go all the way to California? To take my child and brother-in-law across the country itself?" Erina asked, her voice softer.

That'd be insane. Erina had been a one-woman wall keeping the bastards of this city from taking away this ranch of theirs. The government did what they could to protect the property, but it wouldn't be enough. They needed time before those farms they bought could rebuild themselves.

If she left, they'd be homeless.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Joestar, but we need a relative and we won't ask you to send away your baby without you. There is the question of Stands. Your husband might have attained one himself. Dio gave all his followers in Ultimate Despair Stands, and there's data suggesting that Stands can be carried over to relatives without the use of the Arrow." The suit said. He shrugged his shoulders. "If we can show that you don't have a Stand, that might help our case."

"Bullshit!" Johnny snapped. He slammed the door open and wheeled in towards the table where everyone else was sat.

"Johnny?" Erina turned with tired but firm eyes, softening as she looked at him. Her mouth opened with Johnny already knowing what she'd ask.

"George is sleeping," He said, before turning a glare to the two of them. "What the hell is up with you two? You think you can just waltz in and tell Erina to just head for California! We're barely able to keep this place and the Mid-West is swarming with Ultimate Despair. Why don't you do something about that?"
The guy in the suit looked pissed off with Johnny and was about to say something to him, when his partner grabbed him by the arm. Johnny had enough experience to know when someone was motioning his wheelchair. Especially when they were trying to hide it.

"Don't pity me!" Johnny snapped. The small one jumped at that. "You think because of this," He smacked his fist on the left armrest of the wheelchair. "I'm just some useless cripple?"

That made the guy in the hoodie regain his senses.

"You got wrong!" He cried out, pointing at Johnny. Both he and Erina stared at the guy until he realised what he said; nervously laughing and blushing at the attention. "Sorry. My English isn't the best."

"What he means is that Makoto Naegi doesn't think in those terms." His partner replied.

Johnny's eyes widened. This shrimp was Makoto Naegi? The legendary Ultimate Hope who fought and defeated Dio Brando at Hope's Peak? Wielder of a Stand that could overcome Despair?

Neither he nor Erina watched the Mutual Killing Game. They already had enough tragedy without a constant reminder. But everyone else did and it was the talk of the town. People fearing who'd be killed next, whether Dio would just kill them himself, or if they'd ever realise who Dio really was.

Danville, like the rest of the world, had been on the verge of losing all hope before Dio's death. It wasn't overnight, but the city had become recognisable to its former state in the months after. It was like there was actual meaning in living again.

This was the guy? He was freaking whining to his partner about bringing up his name, and this guy killed Dio?

Still, appearances could be deceiving. Maybe there was a side to Naegi that Johnny hadn't seen yet.

Whatever it was, that sharpness and calculation wasn't missing in his partner. The guy was probably one of the infamous survivors who had helped fight against Dio. Johnny definitely didn't like how this guy was looking at him though.

"Jorge 'Johnny' Joestar. Younger half-brother to Jonathan Joestar," He said, looking Johnny up and down as gears turned in his head. "I'm a Togami, we're expected to know these things." He explained, with no small amount of arrogance. "We were going to ask Mrs Joestar to come along with us because we presumed her and her son to have been best suited for the journey. So we can show that Jonathan was not associated with Dio. However, maybe we just need written testimony from her, and can use you for blood-testing. We'll certainly make it worth your while."

"What do you mean?" Johnny asked. He wasn't exactly living rough at the moment.

"The shooting. It practically destroyed your spine." The room's temperature dropped at Togami's words. "I do my research. Even before the Tragedy, that sort of injury couldn't be healed, could it? Ruined your career as a jockey."

"What's the point?" Johnny spat. He wouldn't let his emotions get the better of him. There was clearly a goddamn point.

"There's an experimental treatment on offer." Togami said, making Johnny's heart stop. "It's in the
California HQ of the Future Foundation and is looking for volunteers. Ultimate Despair and their minions liked to play with their food. We've been doing our best to reverse the damage."

This was it. This had to be a dream. This couldn't be real.

Johnny was less than zero. He was a negative existence; caused by all the sins that went into his birth and into his life. The crippling was a punishment for that. Only now he was hearing that there was a chance he could walk again?

There was a part of his heart that was leaping at the chance of this. He could walk again! No, better than that. He could ride again! Jonathan's name could even be cleared. This was his chance to wipe the slate clean!

He'd been given a chance to redeem himself, right? This had to be real!

Erina's eyes were shining with tears, but out of joy at the idea of Johnny walking again. Yet there was a piercing moment of doubt in Johnny's heart.

Why did Naegi look shocked at Togami's words? He almost looked like Togami had just lied to him. As if that whole thing was just a lie to get Johnny to go with them and go through this blood-test thing.

No...that'd be cruel. To dangle water to a man starving in the desert and then show that it was full of gasoline.

Still, he needed to be sure.

"Is this true?" Johnny asked, looking towards Naegi. Togami opened his mouth but Johnny didn't give him the chance to talk. "I'm talking to him! I wanna hear it from the Ultimate Hope? You better not be lying. Is this an actual thing?! Don't you dare lie to me!"

The room was silent. Johnny and Naegi were locked in a battle of stares, neither one willing to blink, as the sweat began to pour down Naegi's face. The Ultimate Hope wouldn't lie to him. He wouldn't make up some story just to make him go along with this.

Jonathan was innocent. They didn't need the Future Foundation to tell them that. But if there was a chance...the slightest chance, that he'd be able to walk again, then Johnny had to take it.

Naegi bit his lip and then sighed.

"Yeah. It's true. There is research going on and they do need test subjects. There is a small chance that it might help your spinal injuries, but..." Naegi's words became loud air to Johnny's ears.

Togami wasn't lying. There was hope for Johnny after all. Years he spent wallowing in Despair, his friends abandoning him and his family torn apart, forced to spend the rest of his days crippled, and now there was an escape.

He could feel the wind in his face again as he rode down the racetrack. The roar of the crowd and the applause of those close to him. That feeling of triumph when he held up the trophy. Being able to do what he loved again.

Johnny Joestar knew there was no real choice. He'd go with Togami and Naegi to California and he
would be a volunteer for those experiments. Jonathan's name would be cleared for everyone to see as well. He wouldn't be less than zero anymore.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

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Giorno had that dream again.

He was in a laboratory of some kind, trapped in a giant test-tube, as scientists watched him and recorded results. It was warm and dark. There was another man there. Standing in a field of corpses looking down on him and whispering thirteen words to him.

'Reach the top of the world, Giorno. By any means necessary to you.'

He remembered little about his life before fifteen. Neglectful parents, a violent childhood, and forced to live out on the streets of Italy. He had been turned into nothing more than a glorified thug with a special power by those days.

Had he not met that injured gangster that one day, Giorno shuddered to think of the man he would have become. He'd have become another regular minion of Passione under Diavolo's rule, rather than removing the man himself. Giorno might have never met Bruno either.

Italy would be ruled by a Caesar in the shadows who had a vision of a new Roman Empire. A state ruled by criminal organizations and nothing more than another Novoselic.

Instead, Giorno had made his life's goal to become a 'Gang-Star' with a code and morals. He would be the true ruler of Italy, but allow its civic government to regrow itself. A corrupt state was better than a criminal state.

Giorno even had the option to expand his rule further. To venture into Europe and North Africa and bring it the same kind of recovery that Italy saw. The power he had was merely a bonus to that.

Yet now the Future Foundation wants to challenge that power. They did nothing to build this place and yet they want to rule it. Giorno had no intention of giving Italy up to those kind of people.

There was little time for reflection, however. The priority was addressing the concerns of the Capo he put in charge of Venice. By rights, they should have been made an under-boss, but Giorno saw little reason to make this snake one of them.

If they had a choice, they'd have ignored Giorno's rules on what they weren't supposed to do, and sold narcotics and guns to whoever asked for them. He was even using this meeting an excuse to push that agenda.

"I'm just saying, we can't keep food supplies going and keep drugs out. They keep pouring down from Novoselic faster than we can catch them." The Capo explained. It was a fair point, until his expression turned opportunistic. "It'd be a pretty good source of funds if-"

"Their target market is children," Giorno said. That ended the debate. "If adults want to poison themselves, they have the right and freedom to do so. But the packets have cartoon animals stuffed to
the fullest at a time of starving and cold children. Novoselic has become poison to all of Europe. Unless you find a way to keep the drugs from kids, we're keeping it all out. Don't make me repeat myself."

"Yes sir." The Capo replied, bowing his head and almost fleeing the room.

He had been practically surrounded from three sides. Giorno sitting by the regal desk in the centre of the room, Trish Una by the left corner behind the chair where the Capo sat, and Guido Mista on the right corner. All three of them were more than ready to strike if he tried something.

Not that he would. Everyone in Rome knew the story of the Stands in Passione. No one knew that 'The Boss' had once been Diavolo, but everyone knew that he was a Stand user. It was only a matter of time before the world knew as well.

The Stand Arrow that Diavolo had entrusted to Polpo had a wider reach than Giorno had thought. Most of them were either dead or working for him, outside of Ultimate Despair and Class 78 of Hope's Peak, but Giorno took few chances.

The Capo's body language told him everything. His words were loyal and his body screamed in frustration at his superior's 'cowardice'. Fear of Gold Experience kept him quiet and that was it.

Giorno never realized how hard it was being a Mob Boss.

"That's not the end of it. One of them's going to make a deal with Novoselic." He said. If it wasn't Venice, it'd be Trieste.

"Want me to take care of it?" Mista asked, leaning forward.

"No. I need you and Trish here." Giorno replied. The last thing he needed was losing half of his Under-Bosses. "Is Fugo back from the Senate?" He asked.

Trish shrugged her shoulders. "Should be a few minutes. Not to criticize, Giorno, but I didn't think he'd be this far into the good graces again."

He's not. Giorno had forgiven Fugo for not fighting with them. He had done well in handling Volvo and shutting down the narcotics team of Passione. The sorrow he had showed, and the loyalty he vowed, were all true.

It was simply that he couldn't make Fugo an Under-Boss, no matter how irrational it seemed. As if there was a mental blockage keeping him from doing so.

Yet he trusted Fugo to make it clear that Giorno did not want to become Emperor, President, or be given any other title by the Senate. He was the true ruler of Italy, and beloved by its people, but could not make it de jure.

Maybe it was because he knew he only trusted a handful of people. Of those handful, he could only afford to send away one at a time. All to rule over minor crime-lords who all saw him as a naive idealist.

There was also the Future Foundation. They barely tolerated his rule as it was. If Giorno made himself the official master of Italy then they'd assume he planned on taking all of Europe as well. They'd never stand for it.
He didn't want a war with the Future Foundation when the peace in Italy was still so fragile. It was why he agreed to negotiate with the Branch Heads, against even Mista's advice, to make a deal over this 'situation'.

It didn't mean he didn't sometimes think of not accepting the offer and daring them to do something about it.

"I still can't believe we're playing along with those guys. The last thing we need are those Future Foundation kids acting like they own the place," Mista said. He might have had a point if not for the fact that everyone in the room was under the age of twenty. "We should just tell them that, if they don't back off, us and Valentine are going our own way."

"We can't reveal an alliance we haven't sealed yet. See if they agree to our continued arrangement in Italy and, if so, maybe get Valentine the same. We're not going to sacrifice ourselves for him though." Giorno didn't trust Valentine any more than he trusted the Future Foundation.

The only difference between him and people like Kyosuke Munakata was that the former stayed on the other side of the Atlantic.

He was under no illusions. Valentine would sell him down the river if it meant the Future Foundation would give him whatever he asked for. Giorno had to be ready to do the same. They'd be at an arm's distance, but if they let him keep Italy, then there was no reason to fight with them.

*And then what?* Giorno was only in his teens and he ruled over Italy. In a handful of years, he'd be running the world's largest criminal network in a nation that loved him. Was this truly his peak?

Why should he stop at Italy? Was there not a peak higher than the sky itself? It wasn't like the Future Foundation were doing wonders with Southern Europe. Novoselic would need a strong hand as well.

*Deal with these things as they come.* Giorno was getting carried away. He needed to consolidate his gains first and that was best done by negotiation. He could reach the top-

A headache came to him. It was the second time this week and it was the same as always. A piercing pain through the front of his skull that echoed throughout his cranium and made his head feel ten times heavier. He raised a hand to keep himself steady.

Trish and Mista immediately moved to his side to help. Giorno raised a hand to stop them.

"I'm fine. It's just a headache." Giorno had a lot on his plate. Stress was just another part of that job with all the headaches that it meant. There were more important things to worry about. "The Arrow is hidden, right?" He asked.

"It's in Mr. President. No one's going to find it there." Trish replied. No one needed to know about their secret; especially not the Future Foundation.

"Good." Giorno leaned back in his seat. His eyes focused on the map of the world just opposite of his chair, paying particular attention to the United States. "Gyro should have located Makoto Naegi and Byakuya Togami by now, unless Valentine's betrayed us. That'll be useful."

The Future Foundation thought that their secrets were safe. Giorno didn't know who the mole was
that was giving Passione such valuable information, but he was thankful for it.

Negotiations with Valentine and the Future Foundation had to be simultaneous. Each could be used as leverage against the other, just as they would do the same to him, in order to get the best deal.

There was also another motive to sending the doctor's son abroad; to watch and monitor the Ultimate Hope and his friend as closely as possible.

The man who killed Dio Brando. What was he like? A simple question that could decide the fate of the world.

Giorno had little time for contemplating, however, as he heard the sound of an approaching airplane. One benefit of the Tragedy was that noise pollution was a thing of the past. You could hear an airplane easily now.

Now if only they could have accomplished this without making large parts of the world inhabitable via poisoning the air.

The Future Foundation delegates chosen to negotiate with him would be landing shortly and Giorno wasn't going to give them any reason to doubt his good-will. Sincerity would be his way of winning them over. Trish and Mista were already readying to stand by his side as he'd leave the room.

These talks would decide the fate of not only Italy, but of the world itself. The re-emergence of Ultimate Despair could change everything that both sides worked so hard to achieve. Giorno wasn't planning on their failure.

So that meant everything had to be nice and clean, and everyone on their best behaviour. Didn't sound too much to ask.

*No time like the present.* Giorno told himself as he made to leave the room.

The future awaited.

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The barren deserts of Kentucky. One of the many landscapes changed by the will of the great Lord Dio and his crusade to make the world his. A crusade that outlived the Ultimate Master so long as his followers lived.

There had once been a mere few thousand of them fighting for Lord Dio. All of them from Hope’s Peak Academy; the false idol of a decaying world. Their first victory had been slaying the students of that school, sparking the fires of war across the globe.

Now the original followers had dwindled down to the members of Class 77-B and those who had gone too far to hide in the shadows. But that was good! What God needed fair-weather worshippers? Lord Dio had conquered the world with his own two hands! Why couldn't his followers too?

No. That was sinful to believe. Lord Dio was Lord Dio, and they were nothing more than wretches that -in his infinite mercy- he chose to make the harbingers of The World's End.
All they were good for was to bring about his revenge and to find a new master. A Heir to carry on his legacy.

That noble mission was not for Gundham Tanaka. His purpose was something baser yet still holy in its glory. A true honour for a worm like him.

Valentine's soldiers didn't search out this far. They mainly protected the rails and roads leading into these cities and only checked on small villages when they were confirmed safe. All part of a plan to keep the head of government safe.

It did mean that Ultimate Despair were able to hide out among the empty valleys just outside. Here they could wait by the Coalfields of Kentucky for a report by one of Gundham's spies. They'd been hiding in wait for some time now.

*And we will hide for a century if it suits Lord Dio's purpose. If it meant revenge. That was why Gundham sat in wait despite the sun beating down on him.*

His faith was rewarded when he saw the eagle flying over him. Welcome To The Jungle had blessed him in ways in which he was not worthy, by enhancing his Talent. Lord Dio's kindness as that of a God's to bless a disgusting creature like himself.

The eagle went in a circle three times as it slowed itself down enough to land just in front of Gundham.

"Lord Tanaka, the Ultimate Hope and the Lesser have begun to move out." The eagle said. To others, it came off as a single bird-cry, but Gundham could speak the language of animals now. "The train is heading for Georgia."

"Excellent news. Keep scouting for further information." Gundham commanded, as the eagle nodded and took flight once more.

The way to San Diego would be long and arduous. It would take a week by train alone by going through the Mid-West and then turning South-West. They would traverse the lands that the settlers of America over a hundred and fifty years ago had to travel down.

They would not travel by train. The forces of Ultimate Despair were more than ready to intercept them before then and would stop at nothing to make them go by foot. Capture would be a mere walk in the park. An incompetent could catch the group then.

Gundham had been blessed in being able to take command of this trial. Makoto Naegi and the younger brother of Jonathan Joestar both travelling together. This was a sign from Lord Dio that Ultimate Despair were not yet finished in their work.

*We shall test the Lesser Brother and see if there is some of Jojo within him. Then we shall punish the one who slayed Dio.* Gundham just needed the location of the next few train-stops and beating them there would be no hard task.

The Lesser Joestar would be put to the test to see if he was truly worthy to have been Jojo's brother. For Makoto Naegi and Byakuya Togami, there would be no test. The blood-eagle was the closest punishment they had to smite the latter.

The Ultimate Hope? No. His needed to be longer. Togami's execution would be recorded and
television, but Naegi's had to be live.

Nevada was where they set-up the stage. The crucifix was ready to be carried, the nails, salt, and knives all waiting for their use, and everything needed for a live-stream was on-hand. The world would watch as Makoto Naegi was slowly broken down into nothing.

The false Messiah would be in a Hell of his own making. He would renounce his ways, die, or be broken into a whimpering slave.

A wheezed chuckle from behind removed Gundham's good mood. It was him.

"You hear that, Monaca? We'll be seeing Makoto Naegi. Won't that be nice?" Nagito Komaeda asked the girl on his lap. His legs were crossed to leave a wide space for the child he had brought with him.

"I guess." Monaca Towa replied. Her elbows rested on her knees which supported the hands she rested her head on.

Monaca had been the only reason that Komaeda's presence was tolerated. How the heretic ended up being the protector of the last Warrior of Hope - but it was Dio's Hope so that made it acceptable for Ultimate Despair- confused Gundham. Either way, it kept them from exiling him again.

It was also why they agreed to not kill Naegi as they would with Togami.

Komaeda and Monaca wished to play with him.

The mere presence of Komaeda will horrify the one who slew the Ultimate Master. Monaca's She Sells Sanctuary will do the rest. Gundham would have his vengeance first. As would all the members of Ultimate Despair on this mission.

Kazuichi, Akane, Hiyoko, Ibuki, Nekomaru, and Teruteru would all have their turns breaking his body and spirit. The one who dared to defy Lord Dio. The one who dared to kill their master! He would wish he had stayed in Hope's Peak when they were done with him.

They were waiting and ready. All across the path from Danville to San Diego, they were lying in wait for Naegi and the Lesser Joestar to emerge and then they would have what they desired.

Gundham was ready to tear the ground to pieces before he heard the gentle strumming of a guitar. His mind was soothed and he felt at peace with the world once more.

There it was. The beautiful music that could come only from the Ultimate Light Musician when she put her mind to the desires of others instead of her own. The Despair of being nothing more than a human juke-box for others. Lord Dio had been wise to break her spirit.

Others had received the same treatment. Gundham had once refused to devour meat in empathy for the animals raised only to be killed and eaten. Yet it was Lord Dio who revealed the truth to him; the true reason for why he abstained from meat.

Now he was a true omnivore. The flesh of beast and the flesh of man were devoured alike. Gundham's tongue gently licked at the incisors that he had taken from Lord Dio's corpse. A reminder that he-as with all of Ultimate Despair-had been incomplete without Lord Dio.
Ibuki gently strummed along, bringing a smile to even Monaca's often-apathetic face, before stopping.

"I wonder what Shitty Jojo is going to think of this melody? It's so cool to finally be playing a song for us only! Ibuki loves her fans and loves people being happy, but it's when she hits the notes," Ibuki played an obnoxiously loud set of notes at that. The peaceful mood had been shattered. "That Feel The Noize really gets into gear!"

"Yes, the symphony of Lord Dio's revenge will thrill the hearts of all." Gundham embraced the despair of the agony in his ears. It was important for him to remember the importance of Despair; the reminder of their place in Lord Dio's world as his faithful servants. "Jojo would be pleased with us. We shall test his brother and see Lord Dio's glory be known once more."

Jojo would have been so proud of them. They had not wasted the lessons they gained from his martyrdom.

"Would he?" Ibuki asked. Her voice was quiet and had an edge to it that Gundham did not care for. "Jojo didn't seem like he was happy with Lord Dio, in the end. Didn't Dio ki-"

He moved swiftly and firmly. Welcome To The Jungle granted him the strength of a gorilla for this; although he dared not use his full-strength. Her jaw would be necessary for this mission.

It didn't mean he couldn't add more pressure. Her blasphemy could not go unpunished. The fact that Monaca watched with interest vindicated his actions.

"Speak about our master with respect. Your stupidity is why no one cares for your music. Dio and Jojo were two souls brought together by fate. Their friendship transcended beyond even blood. Their bond was like no other. Jojo's sacrifice taught us of the futility of Hope and the glory of Lord Dio's power. I will not allow you to sully that without punishment."

Gundham bared his teeth and tightened his grip. The incisors of Lord Dio were more than ready to tear out her flesh if need be; they too able to change from his Stand. Ibuki's eyes briefly shook with fear from the force behind his words.

How dare she insult Lord Dio! Jojo died for them and she dared question it? They shouldn't have allowed her the honor of Lord Dio's right lung. It made her spoiled and petulant.

Ibuki's eyes watered before the swirls of Despair ran round and round her eyes. Gundham felt a large smile press against his hand and let go of her jaw. She learnt her lesson.

"Ibuki forgot! Waa! She's so ashamed of herself right now. Right! She's going to remind herself of the super-tragic but super-despairing tale of Lord Dio and Jojo!" Ibuki raised her hand in the air and set-up her guitar to begin playing.

He'd been ready to hear something chaotic but was pleasantly (but not enough to lose Despair) surprised to hear something lighter and softer on the ears. This was Ibuki's Despair in full. Gundham bathed in it and smiled to himself.

"You're all super-pathetic. Y'know that, right?" Monaca spoke from Komaeda's lap, the heretic happily humming to himself, with a bored tone.

"You are right, Lady Monaca." Gundham replied, turning to fall to one-knee before her. A slave
should bow to their betters, after all. "We are worms in the dirt without Lord Dio. That is why we must avenge his death by any means necessary."

"Don't get your hop-I mean, don't get excited just yet," Komaeda said. He had been one word away from Gundham clawing off half of his face from fury. He almost dared to say that word. "Maybe the Ultimate Hope will make it. Or maybe he'll withstand the torture and his Hope will only grow stronger."

"Unlikely. We shall make him watch as we show him what this world is. What we shall do to his friends." Gundham would not fail Lord Dio here.

"And Johnny Joestar really is disappointing. So much Despair." Komaeda sighed.

That was where he was right. Gundham remembered Jonathan's description of his half-brother and had always wondered if he had been too kind about him. Lord Dio spoke of an arrogant brat who had been shot down in his prime before he could kill himself via drug overdose. Jonathan spoke of a young man who was making a few mistakes and needed proper guidance.

Jojo's kindness had been his undoing; Lord Dio had showed them what a life of Hope would give them. How pointless it truly was. Lord Dio was God and was never wrong, so Johnny Joestar was the wretch he said he was.

But perhaps his crippling had taught him humility.

This would be his great test. Could he become the great man and friend like his older brother had been? Or would he live and die the same pathetic trash he had been before?

Gundham did not have faith in him. What they had seen from Johnny with their own scouts told a story of a man who stayed at home and felt sorry for himself. Where Jojo was a beast of a man but the heart of a saint, Johnny had the body of a twig and cared only for himself.

If he didn't evolve on this journey, he would never do so. He wouldn't even be worthy of death.

Lord Dio, watch over us and give us the power we do not deserve. Gundham clapped his hands and bowed his head in prayer. Lord Dio was watching them from Heaven and would not be pleased with their failures. Ultimate Despair would redeem themselves!

Gundham even had the appropriate way to pay tribute to Lord Dio.

Just in the distance, too far-off for any but Gundham to see, were a group of nomads. There had been rumors of some small towns in the US being able to sustain themselves through The Tragedy, or of communities that survived by fleeing civilization and hiding out. They were likely returning to their homes, or finding a new one.

People like those were often tired, hungry, and carried supplies useful for long trips.

Accept this Despair as tribute, Lord Dio! Gundham declared. Welcome To The Jungle manifested itself as Gundham raised his arms and allowed coils of bone to spout out from his flesh and resemble the structure of a raven's wings. Bones were followed by muscles, flesh, and feathers as his arms were no longer that of a human's.

They were now wings with which he could scour the skies and let the wind flow against his skin.
He wore few clothes for he was neither man or animal, but lower. Animals only chose him because he learned the proper way to manipulate them. He pretended to be a Dark Lord to ignore the fact that no human wished to be his companion. As if there was some greater reason that people would not even touch him. Now he had known the truth.

Gundham Tanaka was nothing. He barely had the right to wear a collection of rags and cloth that covered his most essential parts, but left enough bare for the proper transformations. Battle and moving around were what he did most of the time now. Those who even touched him would be cursed.

The Dark Devas of Destruction dug themselves in tightly to his skin and clothes. His wind-speed could be violent, so they buried themselves deep in pouches where they would be safe, and readied themselves.

It had been a while since Gundham has tasted food that had not come from the trees or soil. He licked his lips in anticipation for the blood and flesh that he would soon devour. The rest of the supplies would go to those who had not debased themselves as far as he had.

To some, Gundham appeared a leader of this group, but that would be wrong. That would misunderstand who he was. He only commanded those who could not command themselves. The way that beasts ruled over those who wished to be ruled.

That was who Gundham Tanaka truly was. A beast. That had been the truth Lord Dio showed to him. A beast that was meant to find and kill those who dared challenge his master.

Makoto Naegi's turn would come. Johnny Joestar's test would be soon enough. For now, Gundham had other matters to attend to, as he took flight.

The hunt was on.

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The Kingdom of Novoselic was once a proud and peaceful nation ruled over by the benevolent Nevermind family. It did not know of war or famine. It was famed for its eccentric but harmless ways. It was small but friendly to its neighbors. The people were once joyous and filled with Hope.

The Kingdom of Novoselic was now a wasteland of ruin and death ruled over by a mad tyrant. It knew only slavery and death. It is famed for being the factory of Ultimate Despair's cruellest and foulest weapons. It had destroyed nearly all of Europe. The few people left were servants to Ultimate Despair.

That is why a man could be pinned down and slowly tortured into revealing information in broad daylight. Those around him were either Ultimate Despair or civilians praying they wouldn't be next to be butchered by their cruel masters. Freedom after Dio's death never came to them.

The woman who was once the mild yet strong-willed Princess of Novoselic was now the mad Supreme Empress of Europe. She sat on a bench nearby as if it were a throne of gold and diamond. The torture was done partially on her command. The regal dress she wore was now tattered and stained by a dozen battles and her skin was the same.
Few spoke of tales that not even her heart was her own. That she had given it to Dio Brando himself after their first bedding.

A more accurate description would be that she had the Ultimate Nurse transplant Dio's heart into her own body. Sonia would have the heart of the Ultimate Master. She would have the heart of her Ultimate Master inside her.

The other leader of this interrogation was Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu. He had become leader of the Kuzuryu Gang after putting his parents-and fifty other retainers-to death with his bare hands. The young crime-lord had sparked off his reign by exterminating the Diet in Tokyo and slowly taking over multiple international gangs for their operations.

Drugs, guns, humans, all were valid products to be sold to pay for the armaments that fueled Ultimate Despair. The scum of humanity were paying for their own deaths. Perhaps that was why Fuyuhiko wished to see the world through the eye of Dio. The eye-patch he wore was slightly stained by the droplets of blood that spewed from the last few battles.

These two were the leaders of Ultimate Despair's European operations. These two were born to be rulers of their respective families and those who served under them. These two were meant to cooperate.

This was not happening.

"Why isn't he fucking talking?" Sonia snapped. Her ire was directed at Fuyuhiko. This was meant to be his interrogation, after all.

"I'm doing my goddamn best. The tool's just defective." Fuyuhiko took his weapon by the hair and yanked on it hard. It spun around to be punched in the left cheek. "Try fucking harder!"

"Yes, Master." Fuyuhiko's Tool replied. She did not react to the pain of the blow; both physical and emotional. Why would she? She had discarded all identity beyond being the bloody sword of Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu.

Swords did not complain about pain. Peko may be a defective tool, but she was a tool nonetheless.

Her body and face were littered with the scars of hundreds of battles. Wounds she had suffered fighting against her enemies were joined with wounds her master had taken and forced onto her instead. After all, any tool incapable of protecting its user was useless and had to be altered.

Beat It could be a cruel Stand. It could remove any injury on the user and transfer it to another. It was why Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu looked little different from when the Tragedy began, compared to others, especially Peko.

Not that Killing Machine was any better. The perfect Stand for someone like Peko was now; a weapon that took pleasure in duty and victory. She kept a grip on her sword pommel as the three more blades spawned from the original to pierce through the victim's flesh. That made it eight blades going through a rapidly-bleeding out body.

"Voodoo's ready if you need him in a better shape to torture." Mikan said from the side. Spit flowed down the sides of her mouth as she eyed the injuries.
"Shut up, bitch." Sonia replied. She gazed at the totem around Mikan's neck with disgust (and no small amount of jealousy), even when it was kept in a preservation container.

Mikan giggled at the insult. "Sooo high and mighty. You think just because Lord Dio is gone makes you in charge." Her smile became a frown as her entire face darkened. "My beloved loved me most. I was his first of all of us."

"Yeah, 'til he upgraded." Sonia snickered.

Mikan almost made a jump for her before Peko turned her eyes towards her. The threat of Killing Machine being turned on her forced Mikan back, but only made Fuyuhiko more upset. He yelled at Peko to do a better job.

Izuru Kamukura watched from the shadows in disappointment. This was why Ultimate Despair rarely worked together beyond a pairing-up. They slowly turned against one another and dragged themselves down. Nothing got done other than worshiping the very existence of Dio Brando.

_Boring._ He thought to himself. The man -an agent of Passione sent to investigate the new sources of drugs going into Italy- would crack soon. Then they'd have their information and actually do something.

They were broken slaves of Dio. Their Talents and intelligence had been blunted to make room for Dio-worship. Not to mention that their thirst for Despair was undermining them. Dio's death had destroyed all their momentum.

Only when Izuru revealed the existence of the Heir to Dio Brando did Ultimate Despair begin to show signs of life. That the servants of Dio would do more than whimper and cry over their parts of Dio.

There were some who fled for the US; both to find Jonathan Joestar's family and to capture Makoto Naegi. The Ultimate Hope had finally revealed himself. Revenge was finally a possibility for them.

It was the first time that the whole group co-ordinated with each other. Sonia, Fuyuhiko, Peko, Mikan, Mahiru, and the Imposter all stayed in Europe to find the Heir and deal with Italy's recovery. The rest would capture Naegi, test Jonathan's brother, and possibly handle President Valentine.

Cooperation was messy, but often more effective than not. For example, Mikan was able to tell Peko the proper way to castrate someone without killing them, even if the wound isn't cauterized.

"I-I'll talk! Just-please! Let me go." The gangster begged. "Rome. The Future Foundation are meeting Giovanna in Rome."

"Knew it." Fuyuhiko hissed as he looked to Peko. She nodded as another blade shot out from the original and went through the neck of the gangster, who died choking on his own blood.

Sonia threw herself off the bench and Ballroom Blitz already started kicking it in. The Stand was a warped portrait of the Ultimate Princess; a painted-on face of a peaceful smiling woman and a long-flowing red dress littered with blood, bombs, and guns all over. There was nothing peaceful about how it kicked the bench in.

"Now what do we do? Rome's a goddamn fortress!" Sonia howled.
"Venice isn't." Fuyhiko pulled out a cigar and put it in his mouth. Peko was there to light the cigar and was rewarded with a puff of smoke in her face. "Stuff it full of drugs and bombs and that'll lure out the do-gooders. Then we take 'em out one by one. It'll free up the time to find the Heir."

"The Heir...I wonder if he'll call me Mother? Maybe if I ask kindly." Mikan took the totem in her hand and began to stroke it. Voodoo emerged from her right shoulder, a tiny doll no larger than three inches tall, made entirely from brown straw, and stroked her cheek in turn. "I have his brothers and sisters ready." She whispered into the totem.

Izuru had remembered reading once that people attached emotions to animals and objects that weren't there. Delusions he thought he was immune from. Yet even he could feel the cold shudder of sickness coming from his right pocket. The pocket where he put the Space Invaders hair-clip that not even Dio knew about.

He thought of other things to take his mind off it. The rumours he had heard were of great interest to him; not least because this was Dio's son they spoke of.

They said that he and others were Stand users; that it was because of those Stands that they ruled Italy now.

*Gold Experience Requiem.* That was the name that someone had heard near the Colosseum. The Stand that slew the infamous Boss of Passione. It was a small blessing that only Izuru knew the identity of the Heir. It'd make things easier. *Giorno Giovanna. I wonder what kind of man you are. A son of Dio rebuilding what he destroyed?*

It was finally something of interest. Something of actual meaning. Izuru would see what Dio's Heir was like and exactly what it was that this 'Gold Experience Requiem' was.

Could it be a Stand that not even Boulevard of Broken Dreams could copy? Or was this the next stage in Stands? The stage that Izuru could never reach, even with the Arrow inside him.

What would he do when faced with the Future Foundation? What would he do when Ultimate Despair would fight him? Or when they would make him their new King?

*Hope or Fate? Which one will triumph?*

Izuru finally had something that could relieve his boredom. There was something that could even shatter the nihilism that ruled his existence. The world at large was basically Novoselic; ruins and decay with a broken people inside it.

The only question was whether Giorno would try to save this world, destroy it to rule the ashes, or abandon it for Italy alone. He left the group, who never even knew he was lurking in the shadows, and departed for Venice.

Things were about to get interesting.

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**Stand Stats**
Get Lucky
User: Nagito Komaeda
Stats
Destructive Power: C
Speed: C
Range: A
Durability: A
Precision: E
Developmental Potential: E

Abilities
Stand's humanoid forms represent Miracle and Tragedy; each one reliant on bad luck and good luck to happen respectively. When an instance of good luck happens, the Tragedy figure begins to fill up with black energy, and when an instance of bad luck happens, the Miracle figure begins to fill with white energy. These instances of luck must happen to the awareness of the user.

When either Miracle or Tragedy fill up with their respective energies, the figure explodes and either a Miracle or a Tragedy ensues. What these entail is unknown and completely random. The figures reassemble themselves when both have detonated.

Welcome To The Jungle
User: Gundham Tanaka
Stats
Destructive Power: D
Speed: C
Range: D
Durability: B
Precision: B
Developmental Potential: B

Abilities
User can communicate with animals.

User has the ability to mimic traits of animals i.e. enhanced bodily attributes, etc. User must be aware of what animal whose traits they are copying and user suffers same weaknesses as that animal i.e. mimicking the traits of a fish mean cannot breath on land, mimicking features of a mole mean high light sensitivity.

Feel The Noize
User: Ibuki Mioda
Stats
Destructive Power: B
Speed: B
Range: B
Durability: D
Precision: D
Developmental Potential: C

Abilities
User can manipulate pitch and volume sound-waves emitted directly or indirectly.
**Killing Machine**

User: Peko Pekoyama

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: A
- Speed: A
- Range: E
- Durability: D
- Precision: A
- Developmental Potential: D

**Abilities**

User can only use this Stand wielding a bladed weapon and Stand effects are cancelled if the blade leaves the hands of the user.

User can summon additional blades and manipulate length of blades at a range of 100m without change to sharpness of blades. Expansion of metal does affect stability and extension of range causes blades to be easier to break. Increasing number of blades emerging from original blade has similar effect, but at half the extent to expanding the metal.

Damage to sword can be repaired, but only damage inflicted to the original blade.

**Voodoo**

User: Mikan Tsumiki

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: B
- Speed: D
- Range: A
- Durability: A
- Precision: A
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**

Stand requires sample of user's DNA and target's DNA to activate. User inserts DNA sample (blood, hair, nail, tooth, bone, semen, etc) into Stand to activate it. User can summon up to seven versions of the Stand but requires unique samples of different targets for each one.

User can heal injuries of self and target by 'opening' and 'closing' Stand to manipulate skin and organs. Can push straw to open and close wounds on skin and organs. Stand cannot do harm to target or user while using this power.

Damage to user is 'reflected' onto target when assaulted. Attacks to the user in this state will not effect them, but the target instead. In turn, damage to the target not originating from the Stand is reflected onto the user.

Stand deactivates if either DNA sample is removed.
**Special Chapter: It Takes A Village**

Chapter Notes

I was doing some talking with The Infamous Man, author of the stories "A Different Kind of Truth" and "Just An Unorthodox Thief", both of which you can check out on FF.net and Spacebattles, and we talked about what it'd be like if Giorno had been born in Holy Diver and was raised by Class 77-B. It also partially inspired by "The Lion's Den" by Arcawolf as well, so check that out as well, if you haven't already.

This isn't by me, but is by The Infamous Man, who let me post it up here for you all to read. Now let's see what it's like for BabyGiorno to be raised by Ultimate Despair.

Spoilers: It's not fun for BabyGiorno.

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**Special Chapter Three**

**It Takes A Village**

xxXXxx

"Guys! You should really see this!" Asahina's declaration, shaky and unsure yet also conveying urgency, made Naegi and Kirigiri nearly run down the hallway.

It had been nearly a year since Dio had died, and since then the Remnants of Despair had fought on. It had been difficult, but they had managed to find a way to try and rehabilitate them all. A Virtual Reality where they could make all the minions of Dio return to their old selves.

After Dio's death, the corrupted members of Class 77 fought on as if he had never died. They proclaimed their allegiance to Dio's Heir, who they called Giorno, and committed numerous atrocities in his name. Grand feasts full of poisoned food by the Ultimate Chief, once sealed diseases injected into people by the Ultimate Nurse, the Ultimate Coach forcing captured athletes to run until their hearts exploded, public executions in Novoselic... all of them committed in honor of their new Master. The Remnants even got smarter in their tactics, committing massive and showy atrocities before disappearing, rather than staying behind to admire their handiwork like they had previously.

Capturing Giorno had become the Future Foundation's top priority so that he could be executed for both his and Dio's crimes.

Naegi hoped that he could meet Giorno and try to change him from the path Dio put him on. Hopefully he was more sane than Dio, but Kirigiri warned he may attack to avoid Dio's fate and Byakuya doubted anyone that had the title of 'Dio's Heir' was somehow anything but as great of a monster as the man himself.

Alter Ego was handling the preparations of the program as each member of Ultimate Despair slept in their pods. Meanwhile they were exploring the last hideout the group had been based in. Only Fukawa and Hagakure were missing, Fukawa was with Komaru and Hagakure was covering for them back at headquarters.
"Asahina!" Naegi shouted as he spotted the swimmer standing before an open doorway, a hand covering her mouth as her body shook. Byakuya was beside her, his arms crossed over his chest and his scowl becoming deeper and darker. "What's wrong?"

Asahina only pointed in the room.

Naegi looked inside and gasped at what he saw.

It was a child's room, no doubt about it. The floor was a soft red carpet and there were plenty of pillows around. A small rocket bed (which could probably launch off if the Ultimate Mechanic was involved in its creation) books strewn about, and there were even plush Murlasees as well as action figures.

In the center of the room was a small boy, just a bit shy of three years old, sat in the center and stared at them. He was dressed in a blue button up shirt, dark pants, and white socks. His hair was long and blonde, reaching to his shoulders. His eyes were as blue as the ocean and stared at them blankly.

He looked very familiar.

"Um..." Naegi kneeled down to the boy so they could be at eye level. The kid's eyes now showed the barest hints of curiosity. "Hi there... I know you must be scared but we're here to help. My name's Naegi Makoto. What's your name?"

Naegi sincerely hoped that the answer wasn't what he thought it was.

After all, the giant poster of the Ultimate Master himself hanging overhead confirmed who the boy's father must be.

"...Giorno." The boy muttered quietly, barely over a whisper.

He heard Asahina let out a sob at that.

"...Dio must have slept with one of the members of Ultimate Despair." Kirigiri muttered quietly, her eyes downcast. "He either did not wear protection, or they punctured a hole in it. They must have raised Giorno and changed tactics so that they could keep him safe."

Naegi's heart broke at that. He didn't want to imagine how Ultimate Despair raised Giorno. He didn't want to think about what they did out of twisted perceptions of love and kindness.

They probably showed Giorno all those horrible things they did, just to display how much they loved him.

"Just what we needed." Byakuya muttered darkly. "That man actually decided to breed."

In Byakuya speak, that meant he hated how Dio brought an innocent child into this world to make him a heir of a kingdom built on bones.

He hated how Ultimate Despair made an innocent child the face of their atrocities.

Naegi didn't say a single word to counter that. All he could say was two sentences.
"Come with us. We're the ones who are going to turn your family back to normal."

When they showed Giorno to the members of Class 77 who first awoke from the program, their reaction wasn't a pleasant one.

Hinata crossed his arms and looked to the ground, his face conveying pain and regret. Fuyuhiko was breaking a piece of machinery that was thankfully not connected to the other pods or anything essential while swearing up a storm. Akane was by Sonia's side while the Princess was on her knees sobbing, and Soda was reaching out for her before drawing away his arm while looking unsure as to what to say.

They had just bested Dio and regained control of their lives, and now they were face to face with one of the victims of their old selves' actions.

It was a very logical and reasonable reaction, all things considered.

Naegi squeezed Giorno's hand reassuringly as the child stared blankly at his probably now unfamiliar family. Naegi could tell from his eyes that Giorno was unsure of how to react to this.

"Look, I know this is a lot to take in. And I understand that you're all in pain right now." Naegi told the other teens. "But please, can you tell us who is Giorno's mother?"

Ultimate Despair kept no records that indicated who the mother was. Giorno had pictures with every member of Ultimate Despair, and the earliest pictures showed Giorno with an expression of fear and confusion before they turned blank. As if Giorno had learned to guard his emotions from the former Ultimates.

Kirigiri theorized the members had not told Giorno who his mother was and the mother never told him, just so that they can feel the despair of hiding a family connection and the mother could feel the despair of not acting as a loving mother to her child.

Everyone looked towards him before looking away, as if none of them wanted to be the ones who said it.

But Naegi noticed that Sonia's sobs had only subsided, not stopped.

"I-Its me..." Sonia muttered shakily. "I am Giorno's mother."

The room grew quiet after that.

**Two Years and Eight Months Earlier:**

"Motherfucker!!!"

The birth of the Heir was not a pretty sight.

Queen Sonia gasped in pain as her attendants gathered around her. The best doctor that Novoselic had was in between her legs, telling her when to push and when to breath.

She still shuddered from the pain. It was like being in between Heaven and Hell, as it should be for
birthing the son of her Lord.

Lord Dio would be pleased.

That is, if he had known about this.

"Push!"

"Fuck you! Give me a goddamn minute!" Still she did what she was ordered. Sonia may relish in Despair, but she wanted her child's birth to be uncomplicated.

Sonia, like most of the others in Ultimate Despair, had been blessed with the opportunity of keeping Lord Dio's bed warm. However what the females of the group wanted more than anything was to be given the blessing of his seed, so that they may have his child.

Unfortunately Lord Dio seemed very adamant of having safe sex.

That put a damper on things.

However Sonia was royalty. She would not be denied the opportunity of birthing the world's messiah.

All it took was a very thin needle through a few condoms.

Now eight months later, here she was.

Sonia felt something leave her, and heard some cries from a young baby. She smiled as she heard, "Congratulations my Queen. It's a boy."

"Give him to me." She ordered the attendant, who had only just begun cleaning the baby with a towel as gently as possible. The young female nodded and shakily handed her the young baby who was still crying. She took the baby in her arms and smiled. For once, she did not feel joy from Despair. But genuine gratitude and love at the sight and touch of her son.

That only lasted a second.

"What shall I name you..." What name would be worthy of the one who would inherit the Earth? The Heir of Lord Dio, who was Lord and Master above all? Lord Dio brought the darkness of despair in his quest for Heaven...

Her mind briefly considered Haruno due to her late fondness for the Japanese culture, but no that wouldn't be appropriate.

Then another name entered her mind and she smiled. Thank Lord Dio for her early childhood fascination with Italy.

"My Giorno. Your birth is the day of light, what shall be great when Lord Dio is not with us." She kissed his forehead before licking her dried blood and afterbirth from his forehead, relishing in the taste.

He already had strands of his father's golden hair...

"Are you done?" She asked as she looked down at the doctor down below.
"Y-yes!"

"Good." She then held out her hand. "Give me the scalpel."

He looked at her with widened eyes full of fear. "B-but my Queen!"

"Give me the fucking scalpel shitstain!" She barked out, and he quickly was at her side. He gave her the small medical blade. "Good."

She then slashed his throat. He gurgled as blood spewed all over her and Giorno before he fell to the floor dead. Giorno cried in freight, but she relished in it.

This would be his first joyous experience with Despair.

"All of you line up! If you don't let me kill you, I'll put your entire families to the fucking wall! Friends included!"

She spent months hiding her pregnancy, giving public speeches while sitting down behind a podium, only speaking to the rest of Ultimate Despair through video.

She could not have tattle-tales.

The last one she kept alive, a fourteen year old girl who had collapsed and soiled herself out of fear.

Giorno would need a nanny after all.

_Eight Months Later:_

The Queen would always call Giorno a smart boy.

Giorno giggled whenever that happened. Whenever the Queen would tickle his tummy and kiss him on the forehead. That was when she seemed to be nicest. She congratulated him when he matched colored blocks to their appropriate places, or fit the shaped blocks correctly into their slots.

She said that he was a fast learner. Smart, like someone named 'Lerdio'. She said that he would be just like him in no time.

Despite all this, most of the time the Queen freightened him.

Sometimes she would bring him into a dark place in her arms. It was scary and Giorno couldn't nap there. She usually brought along his Nana, that same strange look in her eyes as she followed behind the Queen. The Queen would only feed him when they reached the Strange Room, when she would say things that hurt Giorno's ears and he couldn't really understand. She would yell those things at the men hanging from the ceiling before she smiled at him and gave him a strange sharp thing. She would guide his hand and made the sharp thing disappear into a man and red stuff come out, smiling at him and shaking. Giorno didn't understand, the men were hurting and the Queen was enjoying it. Giorno kept crying until the Queen gave him to his Nana who held him as the Queen used the long thing that made loud noises on the hanging men until they didn't move anymore.

Nana always held onto him tightly during those times. Nana was always there for Giorno. She wasn't like the Queen. Whenever it was just him and Nana, Nana would play with him. She would bounce
a ball to him and he would catch it before giggling and putting it into his mouth.

The only strange thing about Nana was that she never smiled.

Still, Giorno liked her better than the Queen. Nana would give him toys instead of those things that looked like the Queen and Nana's fingers but with red stuff coming out of the end and not on a hand. She would sit him on her lap and they would read him books with funny pictures on them instead of showing him pictures of people hurt. She called him Giorno instead of Prince.

One day, Nana tried playing a strange game with him.

The sun was gone and the Queen fed him. This was supposed to be sleepy time, but Giorno woke up when he heard the creaking of his crib. He looked up and saw Nana overlooking him. She was doing something funny with her teeth and she was holding a soft thing, a pillow, in her hands.

"Bastard. Spawn of a demon." Nana said in a scary voice. "I-I am doing an act of Justice here. I'll make that monster pay for what she has done to my home. To my country." Her voice grew softer at that. "I-I am doing the right thing. I'm sparing us from your rule when she's gone. I-I'm... I'm sparing you from... from..." Nana closed her eyes and began bringing down the pillow.

Was this some sort of game?

Giorno brought his hands up and gurgled out, "Na...na."

Suddenly, Nana stopped. She gasped as she brought back the pillow.

Her lip was acting funny and wet stuff was coming out of her eyes.

"Oh God, I can't! I can't do it!" Nana threw the pillow away and kneeled beside his crib. She was crying, like he would. "I-I want to hurt that monster! I want to make her pay! I want to hate you Giorno! I want to despise your very existence! But... but I can't! You're just a baby! How can I kill an innocent baby?! I would be no better than her!!"

"Na...na..." His Nana was sad, so Giorno reached out from his crib at pat her on the head. It's what she did to him when he was sad.

She cried for a bit more before turning to Ardis him. She looked at him with sad eyes as she said, "Giorno... I-I don't know how a boy like you could be their son." She began brushing his cheek. "Giorno... Queen Sonia is unwell. She is dangerous. She won't... she won't enjoy your cries for much longer." Nana let out a sob. "Giorno, if you can understand me, you need to learn how to hide. You must do anything you can not to upset Queen Sonia or please her. You need to understand that all she shows you... it's to turn you into something you are not. Don't ever enjoy it Giorno. All of it is horrible and inhuman." More wet stuff came down on Giorno's face. "Giorno, please... you are perhaps the last true hope of Novoselic."

With that, Nana left the room.

The next day, the Queen took him out of his crib and took him outside. He was behind glass, the special glass where no one could see inside.

He looked down and saw Nana, shaking as she was brought onto a strange podium that had a device the Queen once showed him. A Guil-o-tine.
"For the crime of high treason against your Queen." The Queen grinned as she brought down her thumb. "This bitch is now going to be another example for the lot of you!"

Anna's head was put into the place where it looked like it fit while the sharp thing hung overhead. The Queen pointed to a TV that showed Nana from the front, as if he was right there. "Look my Prince. Look at that bitch." She grinned as she stroked his hair. "You loved her and she tried to hurt you, the son of our Lord and her Queen. Now she pays, and you'll see ever moment of it!"

Giorno cried. Nana looked like she was hurt. Giorno wanted her to come back.

Nana was crying as the man in the scary devil hood cut the rope and the sharp thing came down.

Nana's head came off and landed in a basket as red stuff dropped down.

Giorno cried while the Queen whispered in the ear, "I enjoyed that so much my Prince. I'm so glad we were able to see this together." She kissed him again. "Don't worry. You'll get more soon. And you can say goodbye to her for as long as you want."

Giorno was sent to his crib after that, and in his room was the basket with Nana's head. Her eyes were still open.

For the first night, Giorno cried his eyes out.

The second night, he only cried a little bit.

The third, Giorno learned not to cry.

He learned from his Nana's words. He understood them. The Queen wanted him to act like someone else, to show that he either enjoys or does not enjoy something. Her joy came from how he reacted to things.

He needed to stop showing what he thought.

On the fourth morning, Giorno closed his Nana's eyes and did not react when the Queen came inside with tears coming down her cheeks.

"My Prince... Lord Dio is dead!!"

xxxxxx

The Queen would not stop crying for the entire day.

"How could they!? How could those bastards kill our Lord!? They cut him down as if he were a mere man instead of a God!!" The Queen cried out while placing her hands onto her face. She sobbed, and Giorno simply continued to stare at her. "The Despair... it's too much! I can't even enjoy it!! Ooh Lord Dio..."

Giorno did not know who this 'Lerdio' was. He was someone the Queen talked about constantly, spoke his name in an odd tone and strange look in her eye. She did things in his name, and that included hurting people.
Giorno suspected that he wasn't much better than the Queen.

"Oh Giorno... my Prince" She got onto her knees at that point and crawled towards him. Giorno felt scared but he did not show it. "If only you knew him. He would have been so proud to see you." She then reached in between the things Giorno fed from and took out a picture.

It was a man who was shirtless, bent at a weird angle. His hair was golden, a lot brighter than the Queen's and more like Giorno's. His eyes were strange too, calm and inviting.

So this was 'Lerdio'.

"Look at him my Prince. Look at his glorious form." She smiled and kissed the photo. "This is your father."

'Lerdio'... was his father? The man who was always with the mama in those stories? The one who was supposed to help protect the child?

Why hadn't he ever seen him?

As if she read her mind the Queen said, "Lord Dio was too busy. He needed time and space to spread his glorious presence all across the world. To set up the stage for his rebirth, to show the world his glorious form once he killed the last specks of Hope in the world." Her face then twisted in rage. "Then those fuckers killed him!" She snarled and saliva was sent out from her mouth. "They killed him like a dog in his own ceremony! They should have just lied down and let him stomp on their fucking heads!" She screamed and ripped out pieces of the carpet, the picture thrown aside as she did so. The Queen's nails snapped off and cuts formed on her hands. Giorno knew that the Queen would normally relish in the pain, but she seemed too furious for that.

Then all of a sudden... she stopped. She stared at the ceiling in a daze before a low chuckle came from her throat.

"T-They probably think that's it. That with Lord Dio's death, Despair shall wither and die. And they might be right. The weak ones will surrender or kill themselves."

She looked at him and gave him one of the scary smiles. Giorno tried not to shiver as she brushed his cheek and it felt wet with the red stuff.

"But they don't know about you. The Heir. My Prince, you are the inheritor of Lord Dio's will. The last remaining piece of him left alive." She leaned in and kissed him on the forehead. Giorno could not help it, and a tear came down his eye. He was too scared. He was trying to hide it but it was coming out. "You are now a demigod my Prince. A living Messiah. You shall be the master of Despair now, enacting Lord Dio's will on his behalf." She smiled at his face and said, "Oh, look how happy you are! Your joy from this makes me shiver in delight!" She giggled as she pinched his cheeks. He wanted to wave his hands to stop her but couldn't. It might make her hurt him more.

Then the Queen gasped as she leaned in closer. Their faces were now only a few inches away from each other.

"My Prince... My Messiah... it's time I introduce you to your Apostles."

xxXxx
As it turned out, the Queen's friends were just as frightening as she was.

"YOU GODDAMN SLUT!!!" The woman with golden hair like Giorno's who wore a strange kind of clothing screamed out in anger with tears coming out of her cheeks. "HOW DARE YOU?!"

The Queen was sent back by a kick from the woman with darker skin wearing a white shirt that was opened at the top and a piece of red clothing at her waist that was shorter (a lot shorter) than the bottom part of the Queen's dress. The Queen gasped and fell to the floor, close to Giorno but far away from the other women. A scary happy smile on her face as part of her dress seemed to disappear and black stuff formed on her abdomen.

"H-How can you have the honor and we couldn't?" The Kick Woman sobbed out. She fell to her knees and began crying. "WAAAAH! I wanted Lord Dio's child! I-It would have filled the void my siblings left!!"

"And it would've given Ibuki the muse she's been needing for so long!" Guitar Woman announced with a glare as she then brought her head up as she began hitting her hand against the guitar's strings. It made a noise that hurt Giorno's ears, so he screamed.

"OI! Cut that shit out!" The man holding him, Soda, shouted at the Guitar Woman. (The Queen said he might as well be useful for something.) He wore a black version of one of Giorno's pajamas, but with really smooth instead of soft material and white stripes at the sides. He had scary teeth and eyes, and his pink hair was a mess.

"What?" The Guitar Woman raised an eyebrow as she asked, "Don't like Ibuki's despairing solos?"

"You kidding? I do! But Queen Sonia's kid is still just a baby!" Soda held Giorno up as he said. "How's he supposed to enjoy that later if you make him deaf?!"

The Guitar Woman who kept calling herself Ibuki blinked before looking to the side. "Right..."

She seemed uncomfortable with his presence in the room.

Giorno had to close his eyes as a bright light enveloped the room. Giorno blinked and mumbled something before looking at the source. A girl with red hair who was giggling and holding something Giorno had seen in a book before (Cam-ra). She had all over her body scary pictures with men and women being hurt or lying very still. "Had to take that. You being reminded that Lord Dio's kid was in the room was just too hilarious!"

"How the hell can you take this in stride Mahiru!?" The Strange Clothing Girl asked Cam-ra Girl, Mahiru, with her hands balled up into fists. "That slut slept with Lord Dio, and while she was busy raising his child, we had to accept all the precautions he put in place! She had the fucking gall to put holes in his condoms and..."

"Oh I am pissed. I'm just enjoying the little moments Saionji." Mahiru glared at the Queen. "So what are we going to do with her?"

"I've got Voodoo all nice and ready." The Woman dressed in white with red stuff splattered all over her growled out. The thing hanging from her neck was strange and made Giorno sick. She toyed with a doll in her hands as she bared her teeth. "That bitch... the honor should have gone to me! My beloved loved me, not her!!!
"Yeah. Thanks for reminding us AGAIN Mikan." Ibuki muttered out while rolling her eyes in annoyance.

Giorno was scared, and the Big Man smiled with bright teeth as he rubbed his head. "Keep watching kiddo! This is going to be good!"

Suddenly, the Queen looked up and smirked.

"Thanks for giving me enough of a distance you bitches!!"

All of them widened their eyes towards the Queen who got up on her feet. Suddenly the Crying Girl began running towards her but then gasped in pain and held her stomach as Mikan fiddled with her doll. Sai-oji tried to run forward but was hit in the face by Ibuki's guitar. Ibuki then turned around and hit on her guitar, blasting Mahiru to the wall.

"There's a reason why I let you kick me this far! Giorno and the worm holding him are now within the range to be safe now that Ballroom Blitz is activated!" The Queen took several steps forward with the other men following her as the women kept trying to rush towards her but then began hurting one another. Giorno had seen this before, where the hurt men began hurting each other in the dark room to try and reach the Queen. She would stomp on the winner's head in the end until red stuff came out. "I did what I did because I am royalty! I deserved the right more than any of you! If any of you even knew about him, you would've done everything in your power to make sure he wasn't born! Just like I would've done with you!"

These women... would've tried to hurt him?

"So I kept the Heir a secret from the rest of you. From even Lord Dio, who had more important matters to deal with." She then looked down as she muttered, "A-And now Lord Dio is gone..." She then grinned scarily and motioned towards him. "But now look! He's still here, through his Heir! He is not gone, for a God can never die! Instead, his Messiah shall take his place and lead us to the despairing paradise Lord Dio promised us!"

None of this made sense to Giorno, but then again hardly anything the Queen said did.

The dark man with the four cute things on his shoulders, Tan-aka, chuckled as he said, "And thus the Alpha Female makes her place known within the harem..."

"Well, Queen Sonia deserves nothing less than to be on top." Soda hoisted Giorno over his shoulder. "Ya know, the fact she trusted me to take care of the kid that's not even my own makes this situation all the better!"

The statement the Queen made the women stare at her even more intently, even as they continued to beat each other to reach her.

"And to make this situation all the more enjoyable..." The Queen smirked as she said, "I never did get around to telling him who his mother was."

Ah, that was right. Giorno never did know who his mama was.

The only people he knew were the Queen and his Nana.
The Queen was hiding who his mama was... because she liked it?

At that moment, whatever magic was making the women beat each other up had magically disappeared. They stared at the Queen with widened eyes alongside Soda and the Big Man...

Then smiles spread over their faces and they laughed. They laughed and laughed so much that they started to not look like people. But instead they looked like scary monsters.

"That's just perfect! Holy crap Sonia! Never knew you had it in you!" Mahiru gasped out as she took another picture.

"I-I can't breath! Pffthahahaha!!!" Sai-Oji leaned against the Kick Girl while wiping her bloodied face against her chest.

"T-To think the Heir will now never know is own mother!!" The Kick Girl hugged San-Oji close to her as she cried out, "So cruel! So damn cruel!!"

"Ibuki knows and she LOVES it!!! New material for a song!"

"Hear that kiddo?" The Big Man grinned even more as he said, "Seems like you're going to be without a mom!"

They were enjoying this. All this bad stuff was happening and they were relishing in it. Soda was laughing so hard it shook Giorno while Tan-aka was continuing to chuckle. Even Puke Boy (What Sai-Oji called him) was chuckling in his seat in front of a computer while eating pieces of meat that looked strange.

"Oh my Heir!" Suddenly, the woman named Mahiru ran over and practically ripped him out of Soda's arms. "Oh isn't this wonderful! You won't be tied down to just a single awful woman, unworthy of your love!" She spun him around and said, "We will all be your family!" She then cried as she held him close. She was very soft, Giorno could not help but note. She then giggled and pressed her face against his, breathing heavily.

"The fuck is going on here!?"

Everyone looked to the door to see a short boy with a woman by his side, cuts and bruises along with red stuff dripping down them. Though the woman with the red eyes seemed hurt even more.

"I am busy in Paris dealing with that Stand user, and then I look to see that some sort of meeting was being held? Right after the Boss died? Fuckin' disgraces. Least you could've done is cause some havoc before your self-pity circle jerk." The Short Man then stopped and looked at Giorno, raising an eyebrow. "What the hell is a kid doing here? Kill it like the rest."

Mikan gasped and hugged Giorno tighter. "Fuyuhiko! This isn't just some kid! It's a baby!!"

"Oh." Fuyu then looked over to the woman and said, "Kill it like the rest."

Giorno froze as the Red-Eyed Woman began drawing her sword.

"Don't you fucking dare touch a hair on Lord Dio's Heir!" The Queen snarled out, and the women alongside the men instantly moved in front of Giorno and Mikan.
Fuyu's eyes widened and he muttered, "Wha... Oh shit, oh fuck!!" He then turned around and hit the woman in the stomach. "You should've dropped the fuckin' sword as soon as you heard that last word!"

The woman hunched over, but did not falter. She did not wince or anything as she said, "I humbly apologize Master."

"I knew you were broken, but this is just ridiculous!" Fuyu turned around and instantly got on the floor and bowed down his head. Giorno heard a sickening crack before Fuyu said, "I apologize for my idiocy Young Master!"

The Queen smirked as she said, "Do it a few more times and we may consider it."

And so he did it again.

And again.

And again.

Eventually Fuyu raised his head, and Giorno saw that his forehead looked like it hurt really bad and was covered in red stuff. The part of the floor his head used to be was stained and cracked.

"I-I can do more!"

No.

Giorno didn't want more.

He wanted Fuyu to stop hurting himself.

Nobody deserved to be hurt. Not even these scary people.

"Sta!" Giorno cried out, raising his hand. He then noticed everyone froze and was staring at him.

Oh no.

Did he upset them?

"So..." Mikan then gripped him tighter and smiled brightly. "SO CUTE!!! Did you hear that!? Our Heir said his first word!!!"

"Sorry." The Queen smirked and crossed her arms. "He said a few things before with me."

"Bitch." Sai-Oji muttered out.

"I... I thank you for your mercy Young Master!" Fuyu shouted at the top of his lungs. "Sparing a worm like me so that I may continue to spread Despair in your name... I am not worthy!"

He wasn't hurting himself anymore, and for that Giorno was glad.

"Dinner is served!" The Cook shouted as he kicked open the door and wheeled in a table full of food that the Queen usually ate, but these smelled a lot nicer and looked even better. "A celebratory
feast!" The cook then ran back and before Giorno could blink, chairs were set along the table. "A Feast fit for the reveal of the Heir!" He then went up to the Queen and gave her a strange look. "Though... shall we witness the glory of the Heir's Royal Feast? Hohohuh-"

The Queen then suddenly grabbed the Cook by the back of his hair and smashed his face against her raised knee. "You don't get that privilege you disgusting pig."

"Hey, you can't call another one a pig!" Sai-Oji pointed at Mikan and said, "More than one makes things confusing!"

"Come on 'Togami'." Ibuki smirked as she said, "Announce the Heir's arrival! Ibuki wants to start announcing her celebratory concerts soon!"

"In a few seconds." Puke-Boy replied while pushing up his glasses. "Bankrupting a company this size, even with this identity, takes time you know."

"But before we get started on all of that..." Mahiru brought up her Cam-ra and shouted, "A family picture! I want to capture this moment forever!"

Mikan placed him on the floor while Mahiru ran up and put her cam-ra on the table. The Queen sat to his left while Fuyu sat to his right. The Red-Eyed Woman stood above Fuyu while to cook sat to Fuyu's right. Sai-Oji sat to the Queen's left with Kick Girl standing beside Red-Eyed Woman with Big Guy next to her. Soda stood behind the Queen while Mikan stood behind Giorno with her hands brushing his face. Ibuki stood next to Pig-Butt to the far left while Tan-aka stood to the far right. "Okay! One... two... three..." Mahiru then ran and stood beside Tan-aka and smiled. "Cheese!"

The camera flashed.

It took everything Giorno had not to look scared.

He failed.
First chapter of Despair Over Heaven should be up by Saturday. To tide you all over, here are the Bonus Features that I've been working on. Some stuff are add-ons from the last Bonus Features chapter. Hope you like them.

JoJo Talents

Jonathan Joestar: Ultimate Boxer
Joseph Joestar: Ultimate Street Magician
Jotaro Kujo: Ultimate Marine Biologist
Josuke Higashikata: Ultimate Hair Stylist
Giorno Giovanna: Ultimate Gang-Star
Jolyne Cujoh: Ultimate Delinquent
Johnny Joestar: (Ex-) Ultimate Jockey
Jo2uke Higashikata: Ultimate Mystery Man

Josuke Hair Insults

Naegi: "T-That hair! What kind of prank did someone pull on you?"
Kirigiri: "I think my grandfather arrested thugs with that hair...when he was my age."
Asahina: "Don't worry! The Ocean and I can help you with that lousy hair. You'll be looking cool in no time!"
Togami: "What a pitiful sight. It hurts my eyes just looking at a monstrosity like that a second time."
Fukawa: "W-What do you think you're doing? I haven't washed my hair in weeks and it still looks better than that!"
Syo: "GAHAHAHAHAHA! You sure you want to have that old-timey hair? Just leaves more a target for me to cut!"
Hagakure: "Pfft! Who told you that was a cool hairstyle?"

Komaru: "T-That hair! What did Rohan-sensei say to-Oh yeah! Ah-hem. I'm going to laugh at that hair-style! It's so not cool! Sorry if that's too mean!"

Hinata: "I get it. Someone dared you to have that kind of hair."

Sonia: "In Novoselic, styling your hair in such an awful way is a crime against the state!"

Fuyuhiko: "The hell?! My Dad had all his old pictures with that hair burnt when I was a kid. You chose that dumb look?!"

Souda: "Why would you copy a hair-style from the 1970s, if you didn't want to be laughed at?!"

Akane: "I don't get it. How do you keep the front bit from dipping?"

Gundham: "I sense a dark presence in you. It's your hair! A demon from centuries past has possessed it, hasn't it?"

Ibuki: "Ibuki believes that you should be ever-changing, no matter what people tell you! ...That hair is making Ibuki reconsider that."

Hiroko: "I had a boyfriend once who styled his hair like that. We didn't date long."

Rohan: "It's so good to see that hair again, Josuke. I almost thought I missed you for a moment there."

Haiji: "What a dumb hair-style! You think that makes you look tough?"

"Haiji": "Next to you, and that pitiful hair, I'll seep into the crowd without detection."

Masaru: "Oi! So this is what a mega-level Demon looks like. Its hair is even from the old-days! I'll flatten it, just like I'll flatten your head!"

Jataro: "Just looking at that hair...it makes me feel so hateful! I wanna stick glue in it and see how long it takes for you to get it out."

Kotoko: "Ewww! That hair is double-plus uncute! You probably wash it in a toilet too."

Nagisa: "To create a safe world for children everywhere, I'll destroy that hair!"

Monaca: "Wow! That hair is super-lame! Do you think that's a tribute to someone close to you? You really think just copying the hair will make you a good person like them?"

Mondo: "Tch, mine's bigger. It's got more style too."

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Unused Stands

**Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now (We Built This City Requiem)**
**User: Komaru Naegi**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: A
- Range: B
- Durability: A
- Precision: B
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**
All attacks on the user, and those considered close to the user within a range of 20m, are blocked by the Stand. If the user wishes to protect someone outside that range, the Stand’s protection transfers from the user to that person. Recalling that protection will return the Stand to the user and those within a range of 20m who they consider close to them, but will leave the person outside that range unprotected.

**Nirvana Acts 1-4**

**User: Nagisa Shingetsu**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: E-D-C-B
- Speed: A-B-B-A
- Range: B-E-E-B
- Durability: E-E-C-A
- Precision: B-A-A-A
- Developmental Potential: E-E-C-A

**Abilities**
Act 1 allows the user to scan their surroundings at a maximum range of 100m and supply the user with information on the environment and all 'foreign objects' which are relevant to the user's needs. 'Foreign objects' are defined as living beings and inanimate objects which do not consider the room to be their home. Cannot provide information which the 'foreign objects' themselves are unaware of. Information given to the user is dependent on the user's own priorities at the moment of scanning.

Act 2 allows the user to enhance their physical and mental capabilities. The extent of this enhancement is dependent on the perception of the user's maximum potential by other humans within a range of 20m.

Act 3 enhances the user's physical and/or mental capabilities up to their maximum potential. This is defined as what the user believes is possible for them. If the user believes that it is undeniably possible for them, they can reach that level.

Act 4 allows the user to enhance their physical and mental capabilities to the maximum level that they believe is possible. The user merely has to believe the act itself is possible and does not have to apply to their own self i.e. if they believe flight is possible, they will have the ability to fly despite a lack of wings, etc.

**EoH Team-Up Victory Lines**

Naegi/Kirigiri: "You're pretty amazing, Kirigiri. Your plan worked perfectly.", "Only because I had
someone reliable as you to count on."

Naegi/Togami: "Togami, we won!", "Exactly. There was no doubt while I was directing
efforts...you did adequately too."

Naegi/Asahina: "The Ocean's pretty cool, Asahina.", "Thanks! No one's hurting my friends while I
have something to say about it."

Naegi/Fukawa: "Fukawa, we did it. Thanks for having my back there.", "Someone had to make sure
you didn't try hugging the enemy to death."

Naegi/Syo: "Don't worry, Mako! I'm not letting Master and Dekomaru down!", "I really should have
more faith in you."

Makoto/Komaru: "You like that? Because that's what you get when you mess with Riddle Queen
Komaru Naegi!", "You didn't do it on your own, Komaru.", "Makoto! You're ruining my big
moment!"

Naegi/Hagakure: "Woo! We won, Naegs! You and me beat those guys down! Just as I foresaw!",
"Yeah...how did we do that?"

Naegi/Dio: "Do you understand the difference between our powers yet? Makoto, I'll give you this
one final chance to submit.", "Dio, maybe you could have been a real friend once. But I'm not losing
Hope yet!"

Naegi/Jonathan: "My Ripple and your Stand together...they make a powerful combination!", "Only
because you were willing to take so much of the blows. You're an amazing person, Jonathan."

Naegi/Josuke: "Crazy Diamond's so cool! Maybe if I had a Stand like that...", "Don't sweat it, Naegi.
Livin' On A Prayer gets the job done. That's the most important thing!", "Thanks!"

Naegi/Hinata: "Don't Stop Me Now...it really is the combined drive of Class 77-B. You really have
taken control of your fate.", "It was all thanks to people like you, who gave us a chance, and people
like Chiaki who stayed in our hearts."

Naegi/Komaeda: "This Hope I'm feeling. It's sending shivers down my spine! Naegi, you're so
amazing!", "...Yeah."

Kirigiri/Togami: "You did well to keep the enemy cornered, Togami. That blind-spot could have
been trouble.", "It's a good thing Detective Man was there then. Gold can't do everything."

Kirigiri/Asahina: "Alright! We won, Kirigiri! We beat the bad guys!", "The Ocean certainly played
its part. If you could maybe loosen the hug slightly..."

Togami/Fukawa: "You may have done adequately, but don't think this was an equal effort. What
were you thinking charging on ahead? I won't have Asahina or Komaru complain of negligence.",
"Master...you really care about me!"

Togami/Syo: "Did you see that, my White Knight? Didn't even kill them either!", "Yes...that
was...something..."

Togami/Asahina: "It looks like Gold won this for us. No thanks are needed.", "What?! If it weren't
for The Ocean we'd be-you're so insufferable!"

Togami/Hagakure: "Did you see that?! We took them out and got the win. My predictions were right! Put 'em there, bud!", "R-Remove your arm from around my neck at once!"

Hagakure/Asahina: "Looks like Team Hagahina pulled off a win! We're in the 30%!", "Hagakure, maybe I should decide the team names."

Dio/Kirigiri: "This was a one-time thing only. Now that the enemy has been defeated...", "You think Detective Man stands a chance against Holy Diver? You're no fool. You get a ten second head-start to run."

Dio/Izuru: "Izuru, you have permission to reveal Boulevard of Broken Dreams again. But don't dare to even try and mimic Holy Diver.", "Boring."

EoH Team-Up

Komaru/Fukawa: "Komaru, don't be scared. I've got your back.", "I've got your back too. Let's show them the Toukomaru combo!", "D-D-Don't combine our names like that!"
Victory: "You're ten years too young to be facing the Riddle Queen, Komaru Naegi and her best friend, Touko Fukawa!", "Even when you look cool, you're a loser."

Komaru/Syo: "Oi, Dekomaru, you put on weight. Come on, I can't fight this whole battle on my own. Can't have you getting stuck in We Built This City.", "I didn't! I'm lighter than the average and you know how We Built This City works. We're having a talk after this fight."
Victory: "That got pretty close, didn't it, Dekomaru? Good thing you had me as a prince in shining armour!", "I had it handled, Touko! Okay, maybe I did need help."

Komaru/Rohan: "Rohan-sensei, watch me win this fight!", "Your impression of an idiotic shonen protagonist could do some work. Stick with what you're good at and we'll crush them fine.", "Rohan-sensei!"
Victory: "See, you did fine, Komaru. Don't be someone you're not.", "Thanks, Rohan-sensei!"

Komaru/"Haiji": "Haiji, we've got to keep this city safe.", "Naturally. Just take the lead and I'll follow you up."
Victory: "We cleared this section out. Let's go for the next!", "Damnmit, I thought she was a coward. Fine. I'll get her in the next battle, hopefully."

Komaru/Hiroko: "We can do it if we work together, right Hagakure?", "Koko, your drive's pretty cool when you show it. Don't worry, I learnt a few tricks back in the old days. Nothin's touchin' you."
Victory: "We did it, Hagakure! Smoke On The Water is so cool!", "Don't sell your own Stand short, Koko. It's tough, it's cute, it's actually a lot like you."

Fukawa/Rohan: "Can't believe I have to work with this arrogant blowhard of a mangaka.", "The feeling's mutual, you hack airport-novel-tier author."
Victory: "Looks like I had to win this one for us. Guess you're getting slow, old man.", "Maybe in your little fantasy-world. Who'd have thought Komaru would be the more reliable of you two."
Rohan/Syo: "Yo, Gondor! We doing this?", "....Even her alternate personality's cliche."
Victory: "Tell me, is there anything about you that isn't the cliche 'eccentric and murderous'? The
tongue doesn't count.", "That's not what Dekomaru says. GAHAHAHA! That look on your face!"

Rohan/Hiroko: "So it looks like we're the line of defence between these guys and the girls. What
d'ya say, Rohan?", "Say no more. The mentors are supposed to try and keep the hero safe. And
Fukawa, I guess."
Victory: "I'm still getting used to my Stand.", "You did well, Hiroko. I don't think I've ever seen
someone adapt to a Stand like you did. You're an impressive side-character."

DIOKomaru/Fukawa: "Dio, if I do this, you'll let Komaru go?", "This is not a bargain. Kill them,
and anyone else in the way of my ascension."
Victory: "So Fukawa, will Togami ever look at you as anything other than a killer now? Not that it
will matter. There's more work to do.", "Komaru...you can fight him."

DIOKomaru/Syo: "Genocider Syo, why the long face? Does someone who delights in murder truly
think they have a right to look down on me? I, Dio, give you permission to kill.", "...You son of a
bitch, Dio."
Victory: "Mess with her body all you want, she'll still be stronger than you'll ever be.", "Syo, you
should take care to not make me regret mercy."

DIOKomaru/Monaca: "Yay, the Dio Resurrection Plan worked! Monaca and Dio are together
again!", "Of course we are. Monaca, you will stand by my side as I reach Heaven!"
Victory: "Dio, I want to be by your side forever. Just me. No one else.", "True happiness lies ahead,
Monaca."

DIOKomaru/Kotoko: "Dio! You're back. And super-cute!", "Not even death can keep me down,
Kotoko. Now, show them the combined force of our fury!
Victory: "Dio, was Monaca telling the truth when she said you didn't care about us?", "Kotoko, do
you truly doubt me? The plan remains as it always has been. Reach Heaven!"

Dio/Monaca: "Dio, even if it means using everyone and everything around me like tools, I want to
be by your side forever.", "Then let's put that will to the test."
Victory: "Weak, weak, weak!", "Useless, useless, useless!"

Dio/Nagisa: "Nagisa, I expect you to play a part in this victory. I expect to see Nirvana's power
bloom.", "I will, Dio. I'll meet your expectations. Nirvana will see their end!
Victory: "Total victory. Just as I, Dio, predicted it would be.", "Dio...I did well, right? I met your
expectations?"

Dio/Kotoko: "We face enemies, Kotoko. Tell me. Will you break them, or will you be gentle?", "I'll
break them. I'll break them until they're nothing but dog-crap on the side of the road!"
Victory: "You like that? You want some more! I'll break your faces in!", "Good, Kotoko! Make
your enemies into nothing but trash!"

Dio/Jataro: "Show me your peace of mind, Jataro.", "I will, Dio. I'll show you just what Judas Priest
can make them do."
Victory: "We didn't even have to work that hard. They tore themselves apart for us.", "Because they
didn't have peace of mind! That hatred in them, Dio. It's so cool to see!"

Dio/Masaru: "Masaru. Let's show them the full power of our Stands!", "Yeah! The Hero and the
King! We're gonna smash these demons into dust!"
Victory: "Excellent work, Masaru. That viciousness will serve us well in the battles to come.", "Yeah! I'll win them all, Dio. I'll win all the fights and kill all the enemies. Then there won't be any fear anymore!"

Monaca/Nagisa: "Shingetsu! They're being mean to me! Kill them for Monaca, won't you?", "Anyone who dares to harm the Princess; they'll feel my wrath!"
Victory: "Yay! All the bad guys are dead! Shingetsu, you can have all the cookies you want...and a kiss too!", "Thank you, Monaca. It was no hard t-wait! Wh-wh-what did you j-just say?"

Monaca/Kotoko: "Kotoko, we're best friends, right? So fight these bad guys for me.", "Hey! You Demons are trying to bully the cute Monaca? I won't let you hurt her!"
Victory: "Kotoko, you're so violent. I'm glad we're besties!", "That's right. A girl like you needs to be treated right. Not like these disgusting Demons."

Monaca/'Haiji": "Hey, Big Bro, it'd be a shame if these meanies got away or hurt Monaca's plans. It'd disrupt your life too.", "If your plan succeeds, I'll have a peaceful life? Then fine. But be sure to watch your back."
Victory: "You did it! All those pictures are gonna be ripped up now! Just after Dio enters Heaven.", "You're very confident for a child. Caution is something every child must learn though."

Monaca/Komaeda: "Looks like we'll have to fight together, Monaca. Let's see if you really can become the new Dio.", "...Kay."
Victory: "The Despair of creating a new Dio. But think of the Hope when someone rises up to challenge you!", "...I'm tired."

Hiroko/'Haiji": "Are we running or are we fighting?", "We're fighting. They may be working for the Warriors of Hope. Hiroko, just follow what I tell you to do."
Victory: "This area's been secured. Let's move on to the next one.", "About that...I got some questions for you, 'Haiji."

Hiroko/Hagakure: "Mom! What are you-", "Oi, Yasuhiro, are those people bullying you?", "Kind of?", "Then let's kick their fucking asses!"
Victory: "You alright, Yasuhiro? Those were some sick moves you pulled.", "...Holy crap!.

Asahina/Yuta: "Aoi, I'm not going to fall behind you this time.", "Y-Yuta! Wait for me! That kid...gah I sound like an old woman! I'm not letting you race ahead!
Victory:"Yuta, you'e got to be more careful.", "Sorry, Aoi. I'll take care of my surrounding next time. Let's go!", "You can't just say that and run off! Don't make me tell on you!"

Kirigiri/Diego: "You understand why I'm cautious about us working together?", "Your disputes with my counterpart are your own. Just make sure I get my money. And don't get in the way either."
Victory: "You didn't slow me down. Now hand over the pay, woman.", "...You're less eccentric, but still a Brando to the bone."

Kirigiri/Jo2uke: "You're the Ultimate Detective, right? Perhaps you can...", "After this fight, I will do everything I can to help you discover your lost identity."
Victory: "We did it. They were defeated. I should introduce you to the others.", "Yes. First, I'll need
to know everything that you've managed to gather so far. We can start from there."

Ibuki/Akira: "Yo! Ibuki's here to make everyone scream out for music! You in?", "Just because your world called you Ultimate, doesn't mean you're close to me. I'm gonna turn this battlefield into a world of rock and roll!", "Victory: "Red Hot Chilli Peppers is electricity? That's amazing! Ibuki felt the energy of your music!", "Right back at ya! Feel The Noize is amazing. If we worked together, we'd blow everyone's minds!"

Okuyasu/Oowada: "I'm gonna warn you now. I'm not that smart.", "That's no big deal! Don't need brains to kick someone's ass!", "Victory: "That was pretty sweet. Hey, do you want to go to Tonio's? We'll meet some of my friends there. He don't mind how you look, as long as you follow the rules.", "I'm down for that! I'll just get my bro and we'll meet you there. He loves rules and shit."

Komaru/Jo2uke: "Don't worry. I'm scared too. But if we stick together, we'll get through this! I'll help you find out who you are!", "Really? You're a kind person, you know that? Strong too.", "Victory: "Thank you, Komaru. Thank you for the clothes as well, I'm sorry if my b-", "Please don't mention it! Touko's still unconscious after fainting."

Hagakure/Avdol: "Sweet! Another fortune-teller! My Stand's making a prediction right now! We're gonna get a total victory. So long as you take the lead.", "Your enthusiasm can't be faulted. Very well, Magician's Red will burn the way forward!", "Victory: "We won! I knew it. 30% of the time, I always get it right. That's why I'm the Ultimate Clairvoyant! We're gonna make so much money", "Such pride while being inactive. It seems I must teach you the ways of the fortune-teller. You'll learn the important of respect and truth yet!"

Gundham/Avdol: "A fortune-teller? I can sense the energy around you. Are you ready to fight in the realm of this Dark Lord?", "Dark Lord? Hm, I haven't sensed anything of the kind. If you wish to fight together, however, I'm more than willing to fight. Magician's Red!", "Victory: "Fools! The flames of justice drive you right into the territory of the Dark Lord Tanaka!", "Does he truly think himself in that way? Or is this just teenage dreaming?"

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**EoH VS Dialogue**

**Dio VS Naegi:** "Makoto Naegi. You think your Hope can overcome Holy Diver?!", "Dio, we won't lose to your Despair!"
**Dio Victory:** "Makoto Naegi, you should have accepted when you had the chance! Embrace non-existence!"
**Naegi Victory:** "Dio...it's over...the world is saved."

**Dio VS Kirigiri:** "You should have accepted your place under my rule, Kirigiri. You'll be seeing your father in Hell now!", "Detective Man will turn the truth into power. The power needed to defeat you."
**Dio Victory:** "Kirigiri, you should have stayed kneeling where you belonged. Enjoy Hell, until I have need of your services."
**Kirigiri Victory:** "Father, if you hadn't warned me in time, or struck me with that Arrow. Dio's death is sufficient vengeance. Now to discover the truth about what he took away."
Dio VS Togami: "What are you without your name? Nothing! Now die like the trash you are.", "Please, as if I will be brought down by a temporary bump in the road. Only someone as pitiful as you would think that would break me."
Togami Victory: "You were like all those who were in my way before. Unable to look past the name and see what truly makes an Heir! Trash can never overcome Gold."

Dio VS Fukawa: "Get out of my way, Fukawa.", "N-No! I'm not going to be useless this time! You're not getting anywhere near the others!"
Fukawa Victory: "I-I-I-I did it...everyone, I was useful..."

Dio VS Syo: "Even with Smells Like Teenage Spirit, your scissors can't beat Holy Diver in speed!", "You may be a cute face, but that makes me wanna fill you with holes even more!"
Syo Victory: "I knew I'd win! In The Year 2525 has never been wrong before...I think."

Dio VS Asahina: "Dio...you killed Sakura. I won't let you get away with that!", "Fool! You want to throw away your life with hers? Then I'll gladly send you to Hell with her!"
Asahina Victory: "Sakura...I've avenged you! I've avenged all our friends!"

Dio VS Hagakure: "D-Dio!", "Hagakure, death comes swiftly and painfully for you.
Hagakure Victory: "...Did I just beat Dio Brando? I mean, I knew I'd win! In The Year 2525 has never been wrong before...I think."

Dio VS Izuru: "You think I fear some pathetic science experiment?! Holy Diver will erase your Boulevard of Broken Dreams completely!", "Dio, you're boring."
Izuru Victory: "So you couldn't defeat me. As I expected."

Dio VS Hinata: "We won't let our destinies be controlled by you, Dio! We're creating our own future!", "Don't make me laugh, Izuru. I, Dio, will crush this 'Requiem' of yours! You will never surpass Dio!"
Hinata Victory: "Dio, you'll never overcome our determination. We'll destroy any Fate that tries to bring us down. Your evil ends now!"

Dio VS PB!Dio: "I, Dio, won't come second to anyone! Especially not to a version of myself who clings to the weakness of his humanity!", "You threw away your humanity to become a creature of the night? Ha! I, Dio, have ascended to humanity's peak and become the Ultimate Master. Let's see if your vampirism is stronger than Holy Diver!"
PB!Dio Victory: "The peak of monkeys cannot defeat a human, the same goes the peak of humans against a vampire like I, Dio. Your humanity weakens you!"
Dio VS DIO: "To reach Heaven, I'll need to...but it doesn't have to be my Stand. It just has to be the Stand of Dio!", "My thoughts exactly. Will your Holy Diver break through my World?!"
Dio Victory: "You think a stolen Stand can match-up to Holy Diver? I, Dio, will beat you to Heaven!"
DIO Victory: "So this is the Stand I could have gained? Tch, it's nothing compared to the power to stop time! I, Dio, will be the first to reach Heaven!"

Dio VS PB!Jonathan: "When I look at you, why do I feel as if fate brought us together?", "D-Dio! Wait, could this version be-no. I recognise the evil in those eyes anyway. I won't let you get away."
Dio Victory: "Jonathan Joestar...you were a worthy opponent. But no human can defeat Holy Diver."
PB!Jonathan: "This strange power of yours, if I hadn't used the Ripple, I'd have fallen to it."

Dio VS Jotaro: "The chill that just went up my spine. Why is it that just looking at you pisses me off? Whatever. Holy Diver will wipe you off the face of the earth!", "Good grief. I didn't think I'd have to kill another Dio."
Dio Victory: "Useless! Holy Diver is an invincible Stand! The power to stop time means nothing when I, Dio, have the power of God!"
Jotaro Victory: "Stopping time. Negating effect. None of that matters. You'll always lose because you keep pissing me off."

Naegi VS PB!Dio: "Dio? How are you alive? Wait, you look just like him, but the presence is different. Unless...you're not the Dio I know!", "What is this blathering? I am Dio! And you will make another edition to my zombie army!"
Naegi Victory: "That strength. Those attacks. They weren't human! If it wasn't for my luck, I'd be..."
PB!Dio Victory: "His power. Surely no human could-it doesn't matter. Go, and turn the whole world into zombies!"

Naegi VS DIO: "Dio? It can't be! The presence is similar, but the body's bulkier than before. Unless...you're not the Dio I know!", "You say you know me? Interesting. A Stand user like you might be useful. Would you like to be my friend?"
Naegi Victory: "The power to stop time. I barely got out of that alive."
DIO Victory: "Livin' On A Prayer? Such a Stand is impressive. Yes. I think we should be good friends."

Naegi VS Komaru: "Komaru! Did you take my Valentine chocolates again?", "No! Why do you keep accusing me like I'm a bad guy?!", "You have chocolate stains on your mouth. I can see a box behind your back! Come on, give me my chocolates.", "No!", "Yes!", etc.
Naegi Victory: "Let's see what I managed to-Komaru! You left me with one chocolate? Not even one box?"
Komaru Victory: "Another win for justice by the Riddle Qu-urgh. My tummy hurts. Makoto...can you get me a bucket? Pretty please?"

Komaru VS "Haiji": "Haiji, you're with the bad guys?", "To regain my normal life, I will do anything."
Komaru Victory: "Haiji...I'll get an explanation later. I have to save the city first!"
"Haiji" Victory: "Komaru Naegi, your We Built This City is almost too dangerous. But these people still have a use for you."

Komaru VS DiU!Kira: "So you're the face of the man who betrayed us. I won't hesitate to stop you!", "What are you even talking about? If I have to fight, I'll fight, but everything that happens from here is your fault."
Komaru Victory: "I did it. Hiroko, I made sure you got justice!"
DiU!Kira Victory: "Who was that high-school girl? She acted like she knew me. Those hands...I don't normally go for high-school girls, but I deserve an exception now and then."

Komaru VS Monaca: "What are you even doing? I'm bored with Hope and Despair. Being Dio is too hard. Just leave me alone.", "No! Monaca, you have questions to answer! Who is Dio's Friend?"
Komaru Victory: "Monaca, you won't be happy in space! You can't just run from responsibility. That's why you're coming with me."
Monaca Victory: "You're too head-strong. If you want, I'll break your mind, but then everyone will come after me. Good grief, this is boring."

Komaru VS Togami: "Togami, let's finally settle the question. Who is Touko's favourite?", "W-Wah? I'd happily concede that title to you. We don't need to fight, you fool!"
Komaru Victory: "I did it! I win! I'm Touko's-Ah! T-Touko, what are you-I'm sorry! Asahina and Rohan-sensei said we had to fight!"
Togami Victory: "Komaru, it's possible for Fukawa to like two people equally. Now who put you up to this? It was Asahina or Kishibe, wasn't it?"

Togami VS UD!Komaeda: "I won't be embarrassed a second time.", "To defeat an Ultimate a second time in row. It'd bring me such Despair But think of the Hope when an Ultimate does defeat me! Ah, I hope it'll be Makoto Naegi himself, even if a disgusting wretch like me doesn't deserve it."
Togami Victory: "Luck can only get you so far. The same goes for Talent. Applying skills and constantly refining them. That's how I grew and that's how I won."
UD!Komaeda Victory: "Twice in a row now! Togami, you really have a bad streak. It's like....you aren't even an Ultimate. Hey, you sure you're an Ultimate?"

Togami VS PB!Dio: "That smug look of superiority. I recognise that pomposity anywhere! People like you piss me off!", "So this Dio doesn't even try to pretend to be civil. Fine. It'll make it easier for Gold to bury him."
Togami Victory: "The petulance of a child and the fury of a beast. Any civilised man could defeat you, when on equal ground. Nothing more than garbage."
PB!Dio Victory: "Where is your nobility now, huh? I, Dio, will take the foundations of this world and break them. Now go, my zombie, and spread my power further!"

Togami VS Asahina: "I got a bone to pick with you! Don't think I forgot the stuff you pulled before we discovered Dio at Hope's Peak!", "Don't think I'll go easy on you. My pride as a Togami demands I win this fight."
Togami Victory: "See where charging along gets you? Stop trying to impress everyone by carrying burdens alone. Just leave the fighting to me next time."
Asahina Victory: "Not so tough, are you? Don't try and make us forget by being all cool. I'll be the one to protect everyone!"

Asahina VS Lisa Lisa: "Wow! That thing you did with the stick was so cool! How did you do that? Can show me how I can do that too?", "Perhaps. You certainly look able. But looks aren't everything. Give it all you have!"
Asahina Victory: "Wow, you're amazing! And in your 50s too! With this 'Ripple'...I can protect everyone. Please teach me it!"
Lisa-Lisa Victory: "Those powers! That physicality! I'd be more than willing to take you on as a student. Be ready for the hardest training of your life."

Kirigiri VS Diavolo: "So you're the one they call 'The Boss'. Detective Man turns truth into justice; your crimes end here.", "I-Impossible! How did some stranger discover my identity? Fine then. I'll
destroy you to remove any trace to my past."
Kirigiri Victory: "So, this is the end of the Boss of Passione. That Stand...I'm amazed I'm still alive."
Diavolo Victory: "No one will discover my identity! Your Detective Man is nothing to King Crimson!"

Kirigiri VS Kira: "I finally found you. The Hime Hand Killer.", "Yes, you found me. Now I'll have
to remove you as well."
Kirigiri Victory: "Two Stands? There's so much I don't know about this world. But what I do know
is that the truth will come out here."
Kira Victory: "Those hands! Disgusting. I'll simply destroy her here and resume my normal life"

Kirigiri VS "Haiji": "That disguise is impressive; no doubt the work of a Stand. It's too bad that I
have a Stand of my own.", "Apparently so. This day keeps getting worse."
Kirigiri Victory: "Yoshikage Kira. Without a doubt, one of the most dangerous men in the world. I'll
need more back-up for something like this, next time."
"Haiji" Victory: "With hands like those, no man or woman would want you. Not that it concerns
you, when I erase your body."
Hiroko VS "Haiji": "Hey, 'Haiji', I got a couple of questions I gotta get answered.", "Hm, so you
know. Not that it matters. I will completely erase all trace of you."
Hiroko Victory: "You're not Haiji Towa, are you? You're him. The guy who killed all those girls.
Who murdered Ishimaru. You're Yoshikage Kira!"
"Haiji" Victory: "Those fools are near. I'll have Murray say the Murralsee got you. But first...you
have very nice hands, for a smoker."

Haiji VS "Haiji": "Hey, asshole! Give me my fucking face back!", "Haiji Towa-back from the
dead?! Fine. I'll throw him back into the grave where he belongs."
Haiji Victory: "I did it! My face is back! That'll show you. Now I gotta get somewhere safe. No
telling where those robots will come from."
"Haiji" Victory: "The last time, this time, and every time. Your defeats have been decided since the
beginning."

"Haiji" VS Monaca: "Hey, Big Bro. I can't have you keep foiling my plans like this. Guess those
pictures are coming out.", "If my normal life is denied to me, then there's no reason not to kill you
where you stand."
"Haiji" Victory: "You had the pictures on you this whole time? A bluff. But one that has secured my
normal life. Fate is with me."
Monaca Victory: "I'd have thought you had more fight in you. Oh well, guess those pictures really
are coming out now. Say bye-bye to normality!"

Monaca VS Haiji: "Really? Big Bro is going to fight me? You're so mean to your cute baby sis.", "I'm going to do what I should have done the day you plagued our doorstep!"
Monaca Victory: "Poor Haiji. You know, this is why Dad was gonna leave me the company. Oh?
You didn't know that. Here, let me read his will for you..."
Haiji Victory: "I did it! I saved Towa City! You stay there and bleed! I'm breaking this controller and
putting an end to all this!"

Monaca VS Nagisa: "You're defying me? I guess it's true that Shingetsu is useless, useless, useless.",
"Shut up!"
Monaca Victory: "Shingetsu really is useless. But this is good. Now we can talk about staying where
you belong. On the floor, kneeling, waiting for commands."
Nagisa Victory: "Monaca, I'm stopping this! This whole game! I'm in charge! I'm the one Dio
Monaca VS Kotoko: "Kotoko, everyone's bullying me! Wanna team-up again?", "Shut your goddamn mouth! You brought this on yourself. I'm gonna kill you right here, right now!"
Monaca Victory: "Kotoko, you really aren't that good at fighting, are you? What were we thinking, making a gentle girl like you the Fighter?"
Kotoko Victory: "Do you feel that, Monaca? Treasure it. It's the last time you'll be feeling pleasure for a while."

UD!Ibuki VS Akira: "You want people to listen to your soul? Then do what Ibuki does!", "Change my soul to what people want? Screw that! Red Hot Chilli Peppers is going to show you what a real musician does!"
UD!Ibuki Victory: "Oh, you lost. Bummer. Guess real music does have to go behind what people want. Yay Despair!"
Akira Victory: "You see? All that fame and now you're smacked out on your back. Meanwhile, I'm playing all the way to the stars!"

UD!Gundham VS Avdol: "You dare to challenge Lord Dio? He is fated to rule Heaven and Earth as God in all universes! Prepare to see the wrath of a beast!", "So long as there are those like the Joestars, and those who believe in them, men like Dio will never win."
UD!Gundham Victory: "Fool! No fire can escape the darkness and Despair of Gundham Tanaka. I will present your head to Lord Dio."
Avdol Victory: "That boy...his body and mind howled for blood, but his soul...it wept. I should bring him with me."

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**Dual Heart Attacks**

Komaru/Fukawa: Opponent tries to attack Fukawa, Komaru summons We Built This City's shield around her to protect her, making the opponent switch to Komaru, only for the shield to open and reveal Fukawa stabbing them from behind with Smells Like Teenage Spirit. Both girls then come together and fire a joint Hacking Gun-Taser blast.

Komaru/Rohan: Rohan uses Heaven's Door on Komaru to command her to fly towards the opponent at 70mph. Komaru flies and activates We Built This City's shield form before hitting the opponent. Komaru emerges unharmed, but while scolding Rohan, the opponent emerges and tries to attack her. Rohan intercepts in time and uses Heaven's Door to make Fukawa sneeze and become Syo, who grabs and throws Rohan away before using Smells Like Teenage Spirit on the opponent. Injured, the opponent stumbles back as Rohan...

Fukawa/Rohan: Fukawa is about to change into Syo and Rohan prepares Heaven's Door when they crash into each other. They bicker over whose fault it was as the opponent advances. Rohan uses Heaven's Door to make Fukawa sneeze and become Syo, who grabs and throws Rohan away before using Smells Like Teenage Spirit on the opponent. Injured, the opponent stumbles back as Rohan...
charges back and uses Heaven's Door to make them fly towards Syo who stabs them in the neck.

Dio/Monaca: Holy Diver negates the attacks of the opponent and resurrects those close to them, horrifying them and making them vulnerable to She Sells Sanctuary, which forces them into memory-loops as Holy Diver then breaks their neck.

Dio/Nagisa: Nagisa uses Nirvana Act 1 to find out the opponent's weakest points for Holy Diver to strike, relaying the information to Dio, who strikes these points with Holy Diver. The opponent is blown away where they are then sniped by Hannibal X.

Dio/Kotoko: Kotoko has Little Girls fires its teeth, which the opponents dodge, until Holy Diver catches one and flicks it at the opponent's neck. They are pierced by more teeth and their touch sensitivity increases heavily, which makes Holy Diver's attacks hurt more. The opponent is blown towards Highlander the Great which electrocutes them.

Dio/Jataro: Judas Priest fires glue on the opponent, sticking the opponent onto the ground, and vulnerable to Holy Diver's attacks. Dio keeps a hand on his face as Holy Diver delivers blow after blow, sending the opponent into a bomb thrown by Doctor von Gerolt.

Dio/Masaru: My Hero unleashes a barrage of punches on the opponent and is then joined by Holy Diver, the two Stand delivering high-speed blows as both Dio and Masaru scream 'MUDAMUDAMUDA'. Opponent is blown into Mark Guyver's drills.

Monaca/Nagisa: Nagisa uses Nirvana Act 1 to analyse mental weaknesses of the opponent and relays it to Monaca who uses She Sells Sanctuary. Opponent is distracted while Nagisa uses Sage Robot Hannibal X to increase stress. Opponent thinks Nagisa is behind attacks due to panic and enables him to use Act 2 to break kneecaps. Nothing can stop Monaca from using She Sells Sanctuary.

Monaca/Kotoko: Kotoko trips and falls, revealing her under-clothes, making the opponent look away in embarrassment. She uses Little Girls and fires a set of teeth into the opponent, making them hypersensitive to the touch, immobilising them. Monaca uses She Sells Sanctuary to taunt the opponent over their heightened touch sensitivity and arousal state. Opponent is broken in mind and body.

Monaca/"Haiji": Monaca distracts the opponent with a group of Bomber-Murralsee emerging to attack, giving Kira the chance to send out Sheer Heart Attack in the chaos, lured by the heat of the explosions.

Monaca/Haiji: Good-aligned opponent moves to attack Haiji, but Monaca gets in the way and pretend to be mortally wounded by the injury. Haiji screams at the opponent for trying to murder his sister while Monaca activates She Sells Sanctuary. The trauma of assaulting a child leads to the opponent being vulnerable to Haiji stabbing them in the face with a knife.

Evil-aligned opponent moves to attack Haiji, but Monaca gets in the way and pretends to be mortally wounded by the injury. Haiji uses Eyes Without A Face (out of anger of being attacked), and the opponent is horrified to see that they now have Haiji's appearance, making them vulnerable to She Sells Sanctuary, giving Haiji the opportunity to attack.

Hiroko/Hagakure: Hagakure throws the crystal skull containing In The Year 2525 at the opponent and misses, breaking the skull and releasing its cloud form. He begins panicking as the opponent approaches him when Hiroko uses Smoke On The Water to expand the form of the cloud until it covers the entire floor area. She then creates smoke arms that surround and begin hitting the opponent again and again into the air.
Asahina/Yuta: The Ocean fires a stream of water onto the opponent, keeping them pinned as Yuta dashes along the surface of the blast at top running-speed, punting the opponent right in the head.
A Bizarre Friendship

Arc 4: Despair Over Heaven
Chapter Twelve: A Bizarre Friendship

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Dio took another swig from the bottle in an attempt to calm his fury.

He walked down some empty side-walk in the dead of night without any real direction or purpose. What would be the point? For what purpose did he attend all those stupid shoots and shows if he had failed in his main objective?

That dismissive, almost smug, response from Hope's Peak to his demands as to why he was refused entry for this year. He was the right age and had won awards! What more did they want?! Yet they refused him anyway.

*Unfortunately, Mr. Brando, we do not consider you at the appropriate level of your field to be accepted into Hope's Peak Academy.*

*Appropriate level? Just because I don't smile and wink when made to strip like a whore? I, Dio, am more than just eye-candy!* Dio had said the same to his agent and manager when both demanded he smile more. They dared to imply that they'd drop him. Dio Brando! As if they would be better off without leeching off him.

They never did this out of altruism. They were simply debtors to his father from gambling debts that accepted a favour from him on his dying bed. To give Dio a job and have something to do after he died.

He was young, attractive, and could make most clothes work on him. There was high demand for someone like him. Perhaps they thought, if worse came to worse, they could just pimp him out.

These were not men used to legitimate business.

Not that there was any need. Dio's combination of looks and intelligence were more than enough to win over fans and admirers. The only problem were those who tried to make him starve himself into a stick-like figure, or who wanted him to appear less angry, or 'petulant' as they called it before his reputation became known.

He never dared follow those instructions.

Why wouldn't he wish to be strong? Why wouldn't he appear angry? He had been born to a mother so weak that she didn't even try to defend herself against a brute of a father. She thought she was protecting him. She whispered words of love and tales of Heaven, only to die a miserable death.

Dio was all alone to face a monster who beat him when he couldn't afford alcohol and sold his mother's dress when there was nothing left. Then the bastard dared to make arrangements for Dio and tell him of his faith in him. As if he actually cared?! And what then? A manager and an agent stealing from him in an industry with a time-limit.

Hope's Peak was meant to help Dio move away from male modelling. Give him the connections and
ties he needed to move up in the world. To reach the top. Friendship? Hope? Dio didn't give a shit. He'd use anything and anyone to rise higher in the world.

What was even the point of that school? Acting as if Hope was an actual force or thing rather than a state of mind. It was just an excuse to rub shoulders with the rich and give charity cases a false title. Inheritors all of them.

Yet they dared to deny him.

But now I'm stuck in an industry that'll cast me aside when I won't fuck them. The anger bubbled inside Dio again as he found himself stuck in this rut.

He had money and fame, but those would not last forever. The two lackeys, both mere thugs he chose from the usual hanger-ons in Japan, staggered behind him as they loudly cheered, jeered, and drank their way to hedonism. Dio had no true companions to trust; only minions to command.

Still, they disgusted him. Like giant dumb mutts he could sic on others with the sound of a few-hundred Yen notes. Dio needed another drink, raising the bottle to his mouth and-

Wait...no. No! It couldn't be! Not this! Dio was in another country, making constant shoots knowing how close it was to Hope's Peak, and that type was supposed to have been British-only. But the logo! The brand! Damn it, no!

This low-grade swill? The same booze that his father always drank! The scent that Dio knew from his weeping mother and his beatings! Was this to be his fate as well? How could I allow myself to fall this low? How could I be down the same path as that damn geezer. Damnit!

Dio stumbled down the streets faster. He just wanted to go to his hotel room and just sleep this all off. How could this day get any worse? How could fate spite him any more than it already had? To dangle the chance to ascend before him over years and then take it away in a single day?

He didn't notice the small hunched figure carrying shopping bags in the distance. The figure tried to move but couldn't when Dio's thugs took up most of the lane, so had nowhere to go when Dio slammed into him. The impact took Dio by enough surprise to push him back.

The other person, however, had less luck. He fell back and crashed onto the ground ass-first and yelped out in pain. Hazel eyes almost teared up instantly as soft brown hair jumped in place, a red scarf muffled his cry as it tucked around a thick winter coat. Next to the boy were drawings of some kind and a white corner coming out of his coat pocket.

The booze had dropped from Dio's hand and shattered to bits on the pavement. The alcohol already seeping across the tiles and towards the papers.

"Ah!" The boy screamed as he rushed to gather his drawings in time to save them from being stained. He was fast, Dio would give him that, as he had the papers together somewhat neatly and looked up with desperate eyes. "I'm really sorry. I was trying to move to the side but the whole path was bl-
"

"So this was our fault? You know you just crashed into? Huh?" The thug to Dio's right barked. The man towered over the soon-to-be victim and shoved a hand against his chest. The kid was sent stumbling back again. "This is Dio Brando!"

The artist tried to get away but the thug to Dio's left was quicker. He moved his hand forward and snatched the papers away and looked over them with a disdainful look in his eyes. They took on a cruel mocking gaze.
"Hey look!" He shoved the papers under Dio's nose and he recognised them. Some were original while others were based on characters on posters and ads Dio saw, but they were in the style of most Japanese animation. "This kid's some otaku?"

The thugs cackled at that, pointing and laughing at the blushing artist, as they dangled the papers just out of reach or shoved him aside. It was easy for them. The boy was only about 160cm tall and didn't look much older than fifteen at most. Dio was sixteen himself, but his physique made him look in his mid-twenties.

"What's the matter? Were you finishing up some porno? Or just buying some? He's probably just into that stupid kiddy stuff." One of the Dio's lackeys said, to the amusement of the other.

There were frustrated tears in the boy's eyes as he stopped to glare at them. "It's not stupid! It's part of our culture!"

His words only made the two of them laugh harder and torment him that much more. Dio didn't intervene to help or hinder. This was the closest thing he had to entertainment and watching the suffering of another was a decent slave for Dio. Let some pampered kid know how it felt to have his dreams be kept out of his reach.

Yet, as he watched the boy jump up and down for his drawings, only to be shoved aside, the paper in his pocket slowly revealed itself. Dio was an observant man. It came naturally and was a talent he'd been forced to refine. To try and understand when the next attack would come or who would try to grope him.

So he recognised the symbol that flashed in and out as the paper jumped in the coat pocket. He remembered the crown and top part of a shield, even the tips of white wings, that defined the top half of a familiar logo. Dio knew that letter cover well.

This kid had the official letter of acceptance from Hope's Peak Academy. The opportunity that Dio spent years working towards only to be denied it.

Some pathetic simpering fool was accepted! The drawings had an eye to them. They were at least high quality in their own right and might have been done quickly. Dio wondered if he was the Ultimate Artist or something else.

All Dio knew was that he hated this person like none other at this very moment.

"Hey, Dio, you want us to throw him in the trash?" Dio was shaken out of his thoughts by one of his lackeys. They had gotten tired of their game and now had the boy struggling in their arms. Hearing the threat only made him fight harder.

Like an animal doing its best to escape before being thrown into a cage.

Dio smirked and took a step forward. "Now, now," He said airily, speaking flawless Japanese. Another skill he built up for Hope's Peak that now meant nothing. "He did apologise for his mistake, didn't you?" He smirked as the artist nodded his head desperately, frightened tears in his eyes. "See? I think we can all learn to forgive one another. Maybe his anime isn't like the others."

"His anime?" The lackey keeping a tight grip around the kid's waist sounded confused. Dio swallowed his irritation and leaned in towards the kid.

"That letter in your pocket; it's from Hope's Peak?" Dio asked, not even giving him time to answer. He opened it and read it to himself over soft protests, silenced when his thug tightened the grip. It was an acceptance letter. Each word was a slap to his ego, but Dio continued playing the part.
"Animator? Impressive. Any original projects?"

The boy mumbled an answer to Dio question. That would not do. Dio lost control of his temper as he shot out a hand and gripped the long brown hair by its roots, twisting it in his grip, and yanking the victim's head closer to him.

"Answer me!" Dio shouted, over the cries of pain, as he threw the head back against his minion's chest.

"There is...one, but-

"I think we've found a way to settle this then." Dio said. His voice remained upbeat and polite as always, barring that flare of anger. He clapped his hands and all eyes were on him. "My associates and I will watch your project so far and tell you what we think. If we like it, my friends will apologise for their behaviour and we'll leave you alone. But if we think it's nothing more than dog-shit,"

Dio put his right hand to his back-pocket and revealed a small, but very sharp, knife in his hand that he showed to the kid. He immediately broke out in a sweat and began to whimper apologies and begging to be let go. Dio replied by taking his left hand and taking the boy's right hand into it to hold over the blade of the knife.

"I, Dio, will cut off two of your fingers." He hissed, his voice going cold as ice. This wasn't the first time that he had stabbed or cut someone with this knife and gotten away with it and this wouldn't be the last.

The kid either had little faith in his project, or realised how this was going to end, as he whimpered for mercy. "B-B-B-But, i-it's all j-just line-art an-d I've only just finished the first layer o-of-"

"You don't understand." Dio tightened the grip his left hand had over the kid's right. He could feel skin make contact with the metal and the boy's face was like that of a ghost. He seemed on the brink of fainting outright from just his palm feeling the edge of the knife. "You will take up this wager."

It didn't matter if it was the greatest thing that Dio had ever seen in his life. Those fingers-Dio had already chosen the thumb and forefinger of the right hand-were coming off and it would be painful for him. If Hope's Peak would deny him a place then he would deny them a student.

Let someone else live a life where their fate was ruined. Let them know what it was like to be so sure of their future and then see it all turn to shit. Let them know what it was like to live in uncertainty about what would happen to them.

Let someone else drown in despair.

---

Dio Brando had entered that room intending to cut off the animator's fingers.

It was cruel and petty but he was in such a mood. That someone who looked so weak and submissive could have taken a place that should have belonged to Dio. It was infuriating!

Both of the kid's parents were out for the night; it was why he was shopping himself. That made it easier for Dio and his thugs to enter and make themselves at home. Mitarai could do nothing to stop them.
They were sitting in his bedroom-Mitarai waiting outside-on three chairs facing the computer that was showing the anime to them. Mitarai turned it on and fled the room shortly after. He wouldn't flee the house. Not with his work hostage.

It was already starting and Dio's associates were already asleep. They had learned to not snore in Dio's presence so it was at least quiet for Dio to sit and watch. Two hours and fifteen minutes.

So this was what Hope's Peak saw as Talent? The power to change the world and those who lived in it, and they thought it laid with this garbage? Children's entertainment?

To think that this was Dio's life now. Drunk and sitting in a stranger's house as part of some morbid game of his own design. Where had his dreams gone? Why could he never feel the happiness of success? It was because he knew that what he had was temporary.

The wealth and fame would dry up over time and Dio would be left with nothing. He'd on the bottom again with no way to reach the top. Crime was his only option. Having to suck up to some gangster like a common crook. Like his father.

Despair ruled over him. Dio barely read the subtitles on the screen as he saw the opening sequence. Why bother with small distractions when your fate was so uncertain and filled with ruin?

Yet something happened on that night. Something that would change Dio's life forever. Something that would make him grow.

It was the kind of growth that would only come from decades of contemplation. Of a forced self-awareness about the cause of his failures. Who could have imagined that a sixteen year-old could have had such an epiphany?

Dio felt it come to him slowly. It came when watching the characters live in a world of uncertainty and despair, so unaware of what their fate was, and trapped in a cycle of tragedy. The reflection of his own inability to break free of the control of others.

He saw it when they chose to fight against the chains of others holding them down. They fought to take control of their own lives and bring about the certainty they desired. To move forward into the future without fear of the unknown.

They had Hope.

It was a concept that Dio had only ever heard and never truly understood. It felt like a way for the inheritors and modern aristocrats to pat themselves on the back and give a reason for the givers to feel vindicated in their own abused nature. They were not victims, but champions. To take was to cause Despair, and thus be evil.

Only now Dio finally understood what Hope was. The predetermined harmony that people sought. To be free of fear of the future and instead have peace of mind. The peace of mind that could only come from certainty itself.

These heroes were fighting for that Hope. They fought against the darkness within themselves and within their enemies as well. Despair was not defeated by brute strength alone but by the use of a greater power to win over the lost souls.

At that moment, for the first time in his life, Dio Brando felt true happiness.

With that blessing came a vision. A vision of how such a world could be brought to mankind. Words to be spoken in a sequence, souls to be sacrificed, the pieces of a soul, the trust of a Friend, and of a
holy place.

There lied the path to Heaven. Directions hidden by a fog so thick that Dio only really knew that the signs were there, thanks to the light of Hope he had just seen, and were indecipherable.

What was a mere hundred and thirty-five minutes compared to the truth that Dio had discovered? What was time to the revelation that he had? Dio felt something run down his face. Only when he put a finger to the sensation did he realise that it was tears.

He, Dio Brando, was crying.

The screen went black as it ended; awakening the lackey to Dio’s right. His eyes fluttered and he let out a loud and obnoxious yawn. It took all of Dio's willpower not to rip out his tongue for the interruption.

The moment where Dio Brando had felt at peace with himself; felt Hope for the first time, and this trash was ruining it!

"Hey, Dio, we cutting off that kid's fingers now?" He asked, wiping his eyes. The idiot looked at the screen and swore under this breath. "Shit man, I missed the whole thing? How big were the tits on the chicks?"

The dead man barely had time to motion on his chest with his hands when Dio broke his jaw with a single punch.

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Ryota Mitarai was drenching his clothes in sweat for the second time this evening as he waited outside his room.

Why did he agree to this? He'd just completed the line-art, the sound and colouration only just started, and the dialogue was still in subtitles. Heck, the character designs weren't even final. It was a small miracle he had done the English ones first.

He was showing a skeleton to these people.

What choice did he have? They threatened to cut off all his fingers if he refused. Who'd believe him if he blamed Dio Brando for it? He'd only just googled his name and gave up. No one would think a fashion model was this insane.

Mitarai couldn't animate with three fingers and his parents couldn't, and wouldn't, pay for robotic replacements. He'd lose everything if he lost the thumb and fore-finger. His anime, his place at Hope's Peak, everything.

Tears were coming to his eyes. He was pathetic. Here he was, crying like a baby, waiting for his fate to be decided by thugs. It was like being in school again; being bullied and mocked for what he loved.

It's not stupid. It's not. He told himself, as if it were a survival mantra. Anime had saved Mitarai. Anime had given him hope and a purpose.

Sure, you had your trash. The shows sexualising child characters, turning women into props with breasts, or just not even trying to write well, but it was about the diamonds. The works that could connect with a single person.
The worlds that could be created from a person's imagination. The sort of creations that couldn't exist in this world but could still inspire feelings to those who watched it.

It could make people happy when they were their most miserable.

The sound of something crashing stopped his train of thought. He looked down on his watch and his heart stopped. It was over. Dio and his friends had finished watching his anime.

No. They can't be. Mitarai couldn't let them destroy his computer! It wasn't on the cloud yet. His back-ups were in that room and they'd find it and they'd break that too and all that work would be gone.

Mitarai slammed the door open, fully intending to take the blows if need be, so long as he saved his files.

What he found was Dio Brando holding one of his friends by the neck, as they gagged and spat trying to breathe, as he kept on punching his other friend. Both Dio's right fist and the guy's face were soaked in blood. It was already staining the carpet!

Dio Brando had a look that Mitarai had never seen on his face before. The male model had been quick to anger before, but this was different. If those earlier outbursts had been a volcanic eruption, this was a supernova destroying entire galaxies.

"I, Dio, felt peace of mind for the first time in my life. I, Dio, felt certainty as to my fate. I, Dio, saw the path to Heaven in that art! And you dare ask me about breasts?" Dio roared, raising his fist high to land what might be a killing blow. "I'll fucking kill you!" He screamed.

He liked it. Mitarai kept in a sigh of relief. His fingers were safe. It wasn't even the brainwashing doing the work; he designed them to only stimulate positive thoughts, especially at this layer.

It meant that Dio was genuinely touched by the anime. That he really did feel Hope from it.

Mitarai had to remember to ask him when he started feeling the change. It was hard enough for Mitarai to study animation and brainwashing techniques at the same time. Heretic Angel Mochi Mochi Princess was honestly the first time he used the techniques together and that was years ago. Really low-grade-

Wait, no! Shut up, Mitarai! Stop him from killing people.

Mitarai nervously tried to get between Dio and his friend before he did something he'd regret. He tried to ignore the red and blue that bathed the guy's face. "Mister Dio, I'm really glad you liked it but please don't kill your friends in my room."

"Friends?!" Dio's eyes blazed as they turned to Mitarai. He was afraid he'd be attacked next. It was only when Dio's glare, which had become as cold as the Arctic, turned back to his friend on the ground. "They aren't my friends. They are leeches that I, Dio, tolerated because they made me feel as if I had power. As if I was in control. But I was not. I, Dio, allowed myself to fall into despair and self-pity from my circumstances."

Dio let go of the fri-other person that he was choking and merely gave them a look that motioned to the person on the floor. The goon nodded and went to get his friend up, taking deep long breathes as he did so, and even tried to cover up the bleeding. The two thugs, once so confident and arrogant, were quivering at the sight of Dio.

Mitarai was somewhat relieved that the three men were finally leaving his home. Ideally, they'd be
out of his life. Such hopes were dashed as Dio turned his head back towards Mitarai. He was worried he was going to get attacked again.

Only he wasn't. Dio was looking at him differently. No longer with contempt or hatred, but with interest. As if Mitarai himself fascinated him.

"What was your name again?" Dio asked, his voice soft and without an edge to it. He almost sounded confused himself.

"M-Mitarai. Ryota Mitarai." He replied.

Dio's expression didn't change much, until the ends of his mouth raised into a small smile. It was like he was tasting the name and found it agreeable. Nothing like his sharp and predator-esque grins. This was gentler.

That was the last thing Mitarai saw before Dio turned his back on him and left. His goons slowly travelled behind him with broken looks and bodies. They had come expecting to hurt someone and came out hurt themselves.

Mitarai would have called it justice if it wasn't so cruel to them.

In a slightly dishevelled room with a stained floor, Mitarai was alone again. He was left to sit and think about what had just happened here. Or he could focus on more important things.

He wasted nearly three hours because of this whole thing. Time better spent working on his anime. A few less hours of sleep was a small price for Hope.

---

"I'm so far behind." Mitarai whined to himself. He was supposed to have finished this frame by twelve and he was still stuck on it. "I'm going to have to skip classes at Hope's Peak too. Anything to get this finished."

It wouldn't be the first time he didn't go to classes. There was only so much he could take before realising that it wasn't worth it. The taunts of his peers against being paid and congratulated by studio bosses.

His mother cried and did nothing. His father made passive-aggressive comments about poor parenting and then went on with his life.

That didn't matter. Mitarai was going to Hope's Peak and he would finish this anime, even if it killed him. It would be his finest work. His magnum opus. It was why it'd be worth missing a few meals and hours of sleep to finish even a single frame.

This couldn't be like the others he made. If he wanted, Mitarai alone could finish a twenty-two minute episode and send it off for voice acting in eight hours, and at a serviceable quality as well. It was why so many studios wanted his help.

But serviceable wasn't good enough. Every frame had to be a portrait in its own right and he was drawing a hundred and ninety-four thousand four hundred portraits. Not to mention arranging them just right that people wouldn't notice the under-layers of the anime.

Just like fireworks, people needed to see the lights.
That was why Mitarai pushed himself further and further. He barely heard the window creak.

*I have to do it. I have to reach everyone's hear-

"Ryota Mitarai."

The new, yet almost familiar, voice took him by surprise. He had been sitting by his work desk one second and the next he was screaming and falling to the ground. He barely saved the tablet.

A robber? His parents? Mitarai barely had time to turn his head and see that the culprit was Dio Brando! The famous male model and the person who threatened to cut off Mitarai's fingers last night?

Mitarai tried to crawl back in fear, but only stumbled against his desk.

"We need to talk." Dio said. He sat down on Mitarai's bed as if he didn't just break into his home. "Your work...I don't know how, but it managed to reach my heart. It changed me. Yet I remember something else. Beyond the story. Do you have time to talk?"

A part of Mitarai wanted to ask Dio to leave after what he did, especially for what he was doing now. Another part pointed out that Dio was taller, stronger, and much better at fighting than he was. He'd be staying as long as he wanted.

There was another part of him that was curious. A part that wanted to know exactly what Dio meant by his words. He did like the anime, after all.

Yes, he had been brutish and cruel, but now he seemed quieter and more sincere. That mad look in his eye had been tempered into a warm glow and his body language was far less aggressive. Isn't this what he wanted his anime to do to people? Bring calm to their hearts?

The least he could do was talk it out with Dio. Maybe he'd find out some genuine issues with the anime itself, or find out when Dio felt Hope.

Mitarai got up from the floor and sat back down on his chair facing Dio, who still towered over him despite also sitting down. Talking with Dio would interrupt his work, but so would not talking to Dio and incurring his wrath. It was also good for artists to hear constructive criticism.

Neither Mitarai nor Dio would know it, but this would be the beginning of a very bizarre friendship. Each would be the first true friend they ever had. A bond that would change the face of the entire world.

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Dio extended his stay in Tokyo. The agent had already been pushing for him to make more shoots and shows and thus had been happy to comply.

It was like his entire career changed before his eyes! Where he once dreaded having to put on clothes and compromise with a photographer who wanted to control him, he now anticipated these moments. To have all eyes on him and admire the way he turned cloth into art.

His Hope drove him on. Dio used to tell himself that he didn't care for the opinions of these leeches and worms. He knew he was the greater man and did not need their approval. Yet that was an illusion! All to simply hide the fact that he feared showing his own body.
He feared losing control to these people and letting them decide how he moved his own body. A fear that was impeding his career. A fear he had no need for.

Dio Brando would pose as they desired him to so that he could use them in turn. They would be the start of his rise to the top once more. Tales of how people were drawn to his sheer charisma. Pulled towards him as if he were the Moon to the tides.

Anger and spite gave way to a calmness and peacefulness that bordered on appearing aloof. Dio kept himself just connected enough that people wanted to be closer to him, and then disconnected enough that he appeared an impossible ideal. Giving others desire and then controlling their access to it.

This was peace of mind's effect on Dio! He no longer felt uncertainty. Fear was a thing of the past. Despair? What was that?

All thanks to a single teenager that fate had led him towards.

Ryota and him had been meeting one another ever since. Avoiding the paparazzi was easy when you were still only a niche taste; it’d be harder when he would become an international star. Until then, however, it was a simple matter of dismissing the guards and sneaking through alleyways to reach the Mitarai residence. His parents were often out, and didn't go to his room when they were in, which was good enough for Dio.

The two mostly spoke about the inspirations behind what they did. Dio kept himself more closed than Ryota was being. All he said was that his upbringing was poor and that his career had been going well until a recent stagnation. He spoke of his admiration for the Ancient Egyptians, the sport of falconry, and fine wine.

At first, Dio mostly asked Ryota about how exactly his anime worked. What were once questions about the setting, the plot and characters, and inspirations for it, were now more about the techniques used. Dio wasn't talking about the animations techniques—a blending of classic Western-style and Ghibli-esque style—but a different type.

The techniques to do with mental manipulation.

"It's not brainwashing as you'd know it."
"It's more a strong version of nudging. The first layer you see is the anime itself. The layer below that are the techniques I use. The one you saw was mostly made to induce subtle changes in eye movements to trigger memories. I haven't been able to add the other stuff yet."

"You hijacked my mind?"

"You're put in poses and given clothes that attract people to you and want to mimic you."

"Charisma. You created an anime with the ultimate charisma."

The results were genuine and welcomed, but Dio had little intention of letting his guard down around this person, if that was the case.

"No! Stuff like that are like bombs. This is more fireworks."

"Say you're at a party, or talking to someone. You might like the way they look, sound, or even what they say. You feel positive about them and are more likely to listen to what they say. It's a bit like what you say about gravity. The person and who they are attracts and repels certain people. It's the same with art, animals, and even advertising. Take your modelling. You're put in poses and given clothes that attract people to you and want to mimic you."

"Charisma. You created an anime with the ultimate charisma."

"I felt it. The memory of the lullaby my mother sang to me as a baby. The images of your characters' struggles and triumphs
stuck in my mind, as if it were my own. The desire to find themselves."

Ryota blushed at the praise. It must have been rare for him to hear such words. "It's amazing that it was able to do that to you. I haven't fully decided on dialogue yet. Honestly, what you saw was like looking at a skeleton."

"And who is the man who created the skeleton?" Dio asked, extending a hand and taking Mitarai's with it. "I want to know more about you, Ryota." It was easy to pull him closer to Dio, despite nervous protest, while the animator rested on the office chair. "Who are you? Why are you here instead of school? What drove you to...this?"

Dio motioned to the room around him, but Ryota likely understood the true question. Why was someone with such Talent stuck in their room all day? Did they not have friends to see? Surely they were appreciated by their peers and family.

He knew that the answer was no, but wanted to hear it anyway.

Ryota was more than willing to explain everything. He seemed so happy and trusting that someone finally appreciated his work. That he wasn't just some pitiful hermit hiding away from the world itself.

A father didn't want to be a father more than he just wanted the picture-perfect family, a mother who wailed and tried but was useless, and a child with no friends. Worse. A child whose classmates had nothing but the foulest contempt for him.

They hated his talent. They'd throw him into the trash and throw it onto him, taking pictures and threatening to post it online, when they weren't defacing his desk. Boys and girls alike treated him like the dirt beneath their heels.

What else could he do but refuse to go to school? His mother wailed and his father bitched about it (Dio's words not Ryota's) whenever he could, but neither stopped him. Ryota simply hid himself away from the world and worked on his animation skills.

His classmates tried to bully him online but were crushed by the weight of applause for his work. The studio asking for help on their anime and the later offer from Hope's Peak turned his school-days into mere nightmares. Nightmares that haunted him still.

Nightmares that drove him on.

Dio gave as little as he could. A poor childhood, both in wealth and treatment, before being picked up as a child model. Living in fear of when he'd be forced into...less legitimate shows and knowing the dangers ahead. Being trapped in uncertainty and fear led to Despair, until he met Ryota.

The two mostly exchanged talks about their days, their dreams, and what exactly they wanted out of life. For Dio, it was to reach the top, and for Ryota it was to bring Hope into the hearts of everyone. Truly he was a pure-hearted giver.

He wanted to understand his friend better. He asked exactly what saved Ryota from his school-life and he got the answer he expected.

Anime. Specifically, the more high-quality ones such as Studio Ghibli films, some of Gainax's series, and so on that all gave Ryota a sense of hope. Amazement at the wonders that a pen on paper could create and admiration for the worlds created. It helped that he himself had a natural talent for it.

In time, Dio's stay in Japan would end and he would return to Europe. He had a career that needed to
be re-built and turned into a ladder for him to begin his rise to their top. Knowing this, he had asked Ryota for both recommendations on what to watch, and for them to set up a private messaging account so they could talk again.

The weeks that passed saw Dio Brando transform his image. No longer was he the popular niche that was a terror to work with, but now he was the perfect man. Fine manners and a sense of calm perfection, bordering on natural superiority, that turned all those who looked at him into puddles.

The changes extended to his own interests as well. Books and philosophy once bored him. Mere words spoken by dead people with no meaning to someone like him, so focused on reaching the top. How ignorant he had been. How foolish he was.

Now he took in books whenever he had the free time. He even told Ryota all about them and recommended the ones he enjoyed most. The experience of reading helped to round out the persona he presented to the world. An intellectual touch that lured in the masses.

He was touring all over the world in no time. Demand for him from magazines and television programmes sky-rocketed. The name Dio Brando became one belonging to an international celebrity. The agent who once openly stole his money was now a mere spineless suck-up who begged for crumbs off the table.

No one dared to wrong him.

Both he and Ryota talked to each other whenever they could. Dio was often busy and so was Ryota, but they found the time for each other. They mostly talked about their work, Ryota showing Dio how some of his methods worked, and sometimes Dio himself recommended things to Ryota, from books to shows to even items that intrigued Dio. Something to help Ryota inspire himself.

As for Ryota's recommendations, Dio found some of the shows to be high-quality, others more interesting than good, and some that were confusing, dull, or just full of shit. Cultural differences or not, some of this stuff was simply spewing shit and pretending it was gold.

He didn't hesitate to say which ones these were.

"I didn't like it." He said. They were going to have to make this conversation quick. Dio getting ready for his flight to Cairo and didn't have time to go in-depth with Ryota.

"Really? You normally like the ones with philosophy and fighting." Ryota said, looking downcast. He sighed and shrugged. "Not all of them are for everyone. Though what was it that you didn't like about Casshern Sins?"

"It glorified death," Dio grunted. "The lesson was obvious, 'death is what makes life worth living, suffering brings meaning to life'. The response of every coward who fears immortality. Luna was the hero."

Ryota normally left it at that, but he seemed a bit more defensive today. Was he facing an issue with his own project? "It's not like that. The point was that everyone had grown listless. They were just husks that did nothing." He insisted, as Dio scoffed.

"That's an assumption. They made the people machines because they knew that humans seek out greater glory." Dio replied. He threw his hands up towards the sky. "Should we fall on our knees and thank disease for killing us? Be thankful of poverty? Or illness and pain and death?"

"No, but," Ryota tired to finished but Dio cut him off.
"I, Dio, lived a life of crippling poverty, constant fear and uncertainty, and beatings," He said. Ryota looked down from behind the computer-screen, almost ashamed of himself. "Should I be thankful that it was so character-building? If I had a childhood where I held mountains of wealth and a life of no suffering, would you think of me as a lesser man? Should I be grateful for a wretched past when I might have had one where I never knew of such pains?"

Ryota said nothing for a few moments. He looked up towards the screen again with a stronger look in his eyes than before.

"...But what would you say to that Dio? The Dio that never knew your suffering? Only of wealth and success. Would you admire the you who was an inheritor?"

Dio froze up. He told Ryota of his belief about givers, takers, and inheritors in confidence. That boy had a knack for making Dio open himself up as they spoke about their respective lives. The ideas that they wished to bring. Their dreams and futures.

Yet how could one discuss the future without discussing the past? It didn't mean that Dio was taken aback regardless.

His companion noticed this and his face blanched. Ryota immediately changed tone as if Dio was about to destroy the laptop and never speak to him again.

"I'm sorry, Dio! I didn't mean to say it like that. Look, you don't have to like it. I was just trying to explain what the author was thinking, I-"

"I think we'll have to agree to disagree on that one." Dio said. He kept his back to the laptop, Ryota keeping himself from whimpering behind, before he turned and have a soft smile. Ryota shared one in relief. "I've watched your thing, now tell me what you thought about my question."

It was a question he posed the last time they spoke. For all that Ryota spoke about feeling it from anime and that he wanted to spread across the world, he never seemed able to define it. As if it was so innately good that it couldn't be described.

That wasn't good enough for Dio, and it wasn't good enough for Ryota. That was why he agreed to figure it out to explain to Dio.

"What is Hope?" Ryota tasted the question again in his mouth. He bit his lip. "It's kind of hard to say."

"You must know what it is in some form. You're creating an anime that makes people feel it." Dio said, raising an eyebrow. Anyone else would have had an irritated tone, but not Ryota. The two laughed as Dio waited for the answer.

"I guess, if I had to say, it's about harmony and happiness." Ryota had that fire again. Soft and fragile, yet it still burned. "Being in control of your life. Seeing your dreams and being able to reach them. Not living in fear of the unknown."

"A pre-determined harmony, you could say. To have peace of mind; without fear or uncertainty. In that security, you feel happiness." Dio said, as Ryota nodded. Good. They were on the same wavelength. "I, Dio, have been thinking of such. Hope is to move along your fate without uncertainty. The problem is that you cannot know your fate. The future is uncertain to use because we do not understand each other or the full consequences of our actions."

"That's why I'm making this anime." Ryota said. "It'll open everyone's hearts to each other. We'll be individuals, but individuals who understand one another fully, trying our best to be the best we can
be. Striving to better ourselves and the world; to inspire one another with an idol."

"The only question is, how long until someone becomes uncertain of themselves? They question if their fate is what they desire. They question if they are certain of themselves." Dio pointed out. Ryota's face already fell from the first question.

"Then that leads to Despair." He whispered, just loud enough that Dio could hear through the speakers. The curse that affected mankind haunted Ryota as well. He looked up to Dio with curiosity. "What about you? What's Hope to you?"

The question that Dio had been waiting for.

"...Heaven." The word itself made Ryota gasp. He probably thought Dio meant the Judeo-Christian concept of Heaven. "Not the religious ideal. I mean a world of 'happiness'. A world where no one lives in uncertainty and all can move along their fate. Where all can be lead to peace of mind."

"That sounds like a paradise to me. Maybe we're after the same thing? Your Heaven is my world of Hope, and my world of Hope is your Heaven." Ryota said those words nervously. As if he was afraid that Dio would laugh at him, or scorn him or trying to forcibly connect their dreams.

"I believe that as well." Dio's words made Ryota's face light up like the sun. It was almost cute. "We'll have to end the call here. I need to pack. I'm doing a show in Cairo later today, Rome and London the next week. Being in demand is good, but even I, Dio, need rest."

"You've got a lot of work too, huh? It's the same over here" Ryota nervously smiled and shuffled in his seat. He could barely keep the excitement out of his voice now. "I got an e-mail from the Rohan Kishibe. He said he heard about me and wanted to check out my work. Even though it's in its early layers. A legend of the manga industry wants to see my work. I'm sending it next week."

"I should be over in two. We can talk about how it went then?" Dio asked. His agent had been informed to book as many shows in Japan as possible. Any excuse for Dio to visit Ryota again. His reply was a smile. "Sure. I'll see you then."

The call ended and Dio was once again alone in his room with mostly-packed luggage. The room itself felt emptier without Ryota's voice to fill it and Dio being left with the tedious task of packing. He supposed it was a sign that their friendship was strong.

Ryota was finally beginning to understand the need for everyone to be affected as strongly as possible for his dream to succeed. That it took more than just showing people the way to make them go down it. In time, he would understand that his dream and Dio's dream were one and the same. Then it would be easier to convince him that their methods should be one and the same. That Ryota was being too soft in the commands he slipped into his anime. He'd realise the need for a stronger message.

It was just a matter of time before Heaven would be created.

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Mitarai's room was stuffed with bags packed up for Hope's Peak Academy next week. His computer hummed as its screen was the only light in the room and revealed a white background with an e-mail open for all to read it. Yet Ryota wasn't on his computer.
He was sat on his bed, knees tucked in and arms wrapped around it, as he rested his eyes against his knees. It was a familiar pose and he was doing something familiar too.

Pitifully and bitterly sobbing his eyes out because of the words of another.

He hated it. Rohan Kishibe thought that the anime that Mitarai had spent months planning and drawing out was trash. Not only trash, but something toxic. That it degraded animation itself.

It was like being back at school. The jeering of his classmates and the constant unending wave of insults and mockery. He’d been made to feel like he was worthless. That he wasn’t even worthy of being alive. The self-hatred and despair.

All of those feelings came back to him like a tidal wave crushing all in its path.

*They were right. I am trash.* Mitarai moved his arm to wipe away the tears in his eyes and sniffed. *I should have just stuck with the jobs.*

It was soul-crushing to do the jobs. They only hired him because he was quick and cheap. All Mitarai did was animate women with big breasts and submissive personalities, children—or characters made to look like them—who were the target of sex jokes, and stories without meaning or proof-reading. Quick and forgettable cash-grabs.

The only stuff he was fit to animate. How could he have let Hope’s Peak get his dreams up? Ultimate Animator? Rohan was right, he didn’t deserve the title.

"Ryota, what are you doing?" Mitarai knew who it was before they even sat down on the bed next to him. The only one who cared about someone like him, even if he didn’t deserve it.

"Go away." He muttered, pushing his face further into his knees. "I'll just drag you down."

"I am Dio Brando. The Earth itself can't drag me down and you definitely will not." Dio placed something on his other side—it sounded like a cage of some sort—and moved closer to Mitarai. "Your mother is crying downstairs, something about you not eating. I only heard bits from the wall before climbing up here." He said, almost whispering in his ear.

"That's not why I'm here. I was busy with the-the-" Mitarai couldn't control himself. He was so stupid, crying in front of Dio like a baby, but couldn't help himself.

He felt the bed spring up as Dio left it, walking towards the computer, to see what it said. To see what brought Mitarai to the point to tears, and to realise who he’d been wasting his time with.

"No, don't!" Mitarai screamed, but it was too late. Dio was already reading the email.

*Ryota Mitarai*

*I will admit, I had been optimistic about seeing this anime. I share your thoughts on the overall trend of anime and manga to resort to catering to lolicons, excessive fan-service, and general dumbing-down of plot and characters to get a tiny but profitable market's attention. I also thought that your work on Heretic Angel was an extremely high quality work. Not many people can animate so well on a schedule, if the anime itself was a studio's attempt to cash-in on superior styles of the magical-girl genre like Sailor Moon and Cutie Honey.*

*I had agreed to give you my view on your anime because of this. Never-mind that watching an anime with only the line-art finished and relying on subtitles is a lot like reading a manga without inking. I was pleasantly surprised to find a plot that, while somewhat unoriginal, at least delivered it*
well and offered refreshing character takes. I did have one complaint.

See, your characters are being a bit too subtle for your message. The narration at the beginning shouldn't be about the history of the land and the war it's suffering but perhaps something on these lines: "This is a story about improving yourself as a person. Stop lying around and stop being cruel to people. Work out more, read books, and be happier." The characters should also say something along the lines of "I am the hero who lacks the self-confidence to do what he's supposed to. I will discover courage through trials and the friends I meet."

You might think that this is blunt or detracts from the story, but you clearly have no intention of telling a story.

I know that you slipped in these brainwashing techniques. Subtle. No censor would notice them and this is just the first layer. Add in actual colouring and sound and you'd never notice unless you knew. You have a great future as the Ultimate Brainwasher.

As a story-teller, you've clearly given up on that. The audience is not trusted to watch the show right, in your eyes. The general public can be stupid. They can utterly misunderstand a message and then claim Death of the Author to excuse themselves. But you don't even trust them to try. You shove the message down their throats and cover it up with a story.

So no. I don't like what you've done here. It's a waste of your talents, although you seem more attached to control than art, so who knows? Maybe this is your true talent but it's not one I care to acknowledge. Do not contact me again, if you insist on this being your path. I won't tell the authorities about these techniques, despite them breaking numerous laws, but you should think about who you actually want to be.

Rohan Kishibe.

Now Dio would think that Mitarai was a control-obsessed freak too. Manipulating people into doing what he wanted. How could he have seen that as Hope? Mitarai didn't deserve his talent. He didn't deserve friends.

He could hear Dio typing on his keyboard, barely looking up with misty-eyes. It was just barely enough that he could read what Dio was researching. Why was he looking up sales figures for Shonen Jump?

"You said he was one of the greatest manga artists." Dio said, Mitarai nodding at his words. His friend (although he didn't know for how long) pointed to the computer screen dismissively. "So why is he ranked so low?"

Mitarai felt a need to defend the man who had crushed his dreams. "Just because he doesn't sell well-"

"If he's such a fine story-teller, he can balance the need to cater to markets with a meaning story. Plenty of other writers do it."

"What?"

"I see you breaking apart because you were bullied again. Bullied by someone jealous of your talents. Of your ability to change the world while they can only ever be on the sidelines." Dio walked towards him and leaned on the bed. He rested a hand on the wall just above Mitarai's head, making him stare right at his chest, and giving Mitarai little escape.
He wasn't wrong. Rohan Kishibe made Mitarai feel as if he was a pervert or a monster, instead of someone who just wanted to push people along slightly. As if he should be ashamed of what he did when it came from an honest place. He was trying to help people and Rohan insulted him for it!

But he said I had talent. He said... He said a lot of mean things too. Things he could have phrased in a kinder way. Just because he didn't like Mitarai's techniques? I just want to make a world of Hope. To help people. And he says I'm an 'Ultimate Brainwasher'?

"He made you feel like trash, didn't he? It was like those children again? Why care the opinion of those who despise you? Is my approval not enough? Are your friends not enough?" Dio asked, leaning in closer to Mitarai with every word.

"I don't have any." Mitarai mumbled. Why would anyone want to be his friend?

"You have me," Dio said. His lips were just millimetres from Mitarai’s right ear.

That did it. Mitarai threw his arms open and wrapped them around Dio, holding onto him as if he was a life-raft. He was right. Dio was Mitarai's friend. His only one in the whole world. The only one who understood him and what he was trying to do.

Mitarai feared that his tears would mess up Dio's clothes and he nuzzled into his chest. He was wrong to have doubted Dio for even a second, as the arm that wasn't propping Dio up itself wrapped around Mitarai and pulled him closer. Dio's smile could be felt on the back of Mitarai's head.

They could have stayed like this for a lot longer if Mitarai didn't feel a sharp tug on his hair. That hurt! It came from the same direction as the cage as he turned his head and looked at the eyes of an incredibly upset falcon.

His scream thankfully didn't seem to bother Dio that much; who just laughed.

"I see Pet Shop is the jealous type." Dio said, while the bird kept tugging on a particular lock of Mitarai's hair. He tried to fight back but was losing the game of strength. "A falcon I bought in Cairo. I made it clear to my staff that this bird would follow where I go."

Mitarai tried to play nice to the very angry-looking bird. "N-Nice to meet you, Pet Sho-AH!"

It took a single look from Dio to make Pet Shop release him, even as it kept its intense stare directed at Mitarai. It made sense for Dio to have such an intimidating pet.

One look at Dio and you saw an imposing figure, never realising just what kindness could lie within him. Everything that he had done for Mitarai and he felt like he couldn't repay him back. Dio was the first one to appreciate his anime and the first to defend him against those who wanted to tear him down.

There was one thing he could do, however small it was.

"Dio. How are you at acting?" Mitarai asked. He thought he was too quiet as it took Dio a moment to notice what he said. "Voice-acting, I mean. Your Japanese is great, but there's a difference in speaking the language and acting in it."

"You want me to cameo in your anime?" Dio asked, half his attention on Mitarai and half on Pet Shop.

"I want you to voice the main character." Mitarai said it quickly. Fast enough that he could play it off as a joke if Dio laughed.
Instead, after a brief pause, Dio smiled at him with a warmth he never knew and nodded.

This was the moment where the two crossed a line together. They were no longer just companions, but close friends who would stand by one another. Where the world had rejected Mitarai, Dio had accepted him.

It was a long and difficult recording session, Dio unused to the mechanics of voice acting, with trials for Mitarai himself (even with Dio's help, Pet Shop still disliked him), but they did it together. Dio Brando and Ryota Mitarai had a bond that could not be broken.

Mitarai went to Hope's Peak and felt a surge of inspiration drive him forward. Driving him to complete his anime and fill the world with Hope, to reach out to those in Despair and free them. Give them the gift of peace of mind that Dio received.

There were a few problems. Even Dio had trouble understanding that a few hours without sleep and a couple of missed meals were nothing compared to the project. Mitarai would be fine living alone. He didn't have to worry about his friend, however much it was appreciated.

Humanity couldn't overcome Despair on its own. It needed to be guided towards Hope and Mitarai's anime would do that, even if it damaged his health.

Dio told Mitarai once that fate brought the two of them together. That it was meant to save Dio from a life of self-pity and despair as he failed to accomplish his dreams. It was nice to be told how needed you were, but Mitarai disagreed. Dio couldn't fail. It wasn't in his nature. It was like expecting the sun to freeze or the moon to be set alight.

No. Fate brought the two of them together to help Mitarai. To give him the courage to show Rohan his work and then the strength to overcome the bitter reply. To remind him that he was on the right path. That he needed to keep fighting and working to bring about a better world.

To help mankind reach Heaven.

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Dio Brando took a sip of his wine and smiled.

It was an expensive wine. The sort which came form a nobleman's vineyard centuries ago and had been allowed to ripen and age until the right man bought it. The kind of man who had risen to the top of his field and had the time to enjoy the finer things in life.

A luxury private jet that was flying him from Los Angeles to Tokyo, for example, where Dio could sit and enjoy comfort with a personal assistant to a member of the Steering Committee of Hope's Peak. A mere turn of his head and he could see Pet Shop flying against the clouds. The bird had grown quickly under his care.

He had been warned that it was a petulant thing. Unruly and cruel to any who tried to command it, devouring its last masters cats. Dio knew better. It was not that Pet Shop was unruly; it was testing its master. Seeing if they truly had the strength and worth to command it.

Pet Shop only had to witness Dio's presence to know that he had the iron will to own it. To let it fly free in the confidence that it would return and do his bidding. In turn, Dio rarely had reason to deny the falcon its wishes.

What were a few missing pets of loud and obnoxious neighbours?
The only problem was that Pet Shop did not like Ryota, which was a problem because Dio visited his friend whenever he could.

It was a convenience that Ryota now lived in the dorms of Hope's Peak Academy as it made visits easier. It was the worst-kept secret in the world that Dio was going to be in next year's class. Visiting Hope's Peak was simply making sure that all the arrangements could be made.

For Dio, it meant that he could visit Ryota whenever he had the chance. It had been two months since Ryota began his first year at Hope's Peak Academy and it was only now that Dio had the chance to actually visit him though. Most of their conversations were through the computer.

They mostly consisted on Ryota's progress on the anime. Right now, he was trying to find the right voice actors for the anime and the title for it. He wanted something that spoke to everyone when it came to that. Dio had a few ideas that he'd share when he landed.

He'd better be remembering to eat and sleep. Heaven cannot be reached if he dies. I will not have you martyr yourself, Ryota. Dio grimaced at the thought. Ryota had a tendency to neglect his health and that, more than anything, was causing delays.

It had reached the point where Dio threatened to feed Ryota as if he was a baby bird.

A bluff but it at least scared Ryota straight enough to stop skipping meals between his last visit and his last call. Dio found his friend's face, a mixture of pale white and deep blue, hilarious. He was so easy to tease and lie to. It was one of his more endearing traits.

Dio and Ryota were aligned in many ways, but Ryota had a softer life. His father was neglectful rather than abusive, his mother fretted rather than endured, and he had a place to flee and hide from the world, whilst Dio had only his brain and might to rely on. There was no great salvation for him.

Until he had achieved peace of mind; seeing the path to Heaven and the fate that awaited him on top of the world itself.

It had meant that Dio needed to guide his friend towards the proper solutions. Fireworks were flashy and dazzled children and adults, but they lacked the impact needed to sear into the minds of all who saw it. No one remembered every pattern of a fireworks display.

Bombs? People remembered bombs. They could remember the fire and impact they made on their surroundings. No one could forget just what a bomb could do.

It was the same with Ryota's masterpiece. His anime, left alone, would inspire people to better themselves and then they would forget about it. A few would follow through, but mankind would not be able to overcome Despair that way. They would not know their fate and they would still live in uncertainty.

He knew that humanity needed to be pushed, but he underestimated just how hard it needed to be.

It had to be stronger. People needed to want nothing more than to know true happiness. All of humanity would be made to assist Dio in interpreting the visions that haunted him since he had peace of mind. The 36 sinners, the incorruptible Friend, the fragments of a soul, and more. What did they mean?

Dio would find the answer.

Until then, he looked through the laptop of the Hope's Peak official who was busy being asleep in their own chair. The seats were very comfortable, but it was inadvisable to let your guard down for
even a moment. You could let someone else discover the password you kept in a file in your suitcase. You could even miss when someone drugged your wine.

There was always a need to know information. Dio needed to know everything about the school he would attend and the people inside it. All the better to control the situation with and to form the necessary bonds to ensure the plan’s smooth success.

That was when Dio Brando saw it. It must have been destiny itself working to show Dio the next stage in what would be his ascension to a level beyond all of mankind. It must have been fated for Dio to learn of this cruel and maniacal plan devised by bitter old men running out of time.

_The Hope Cultivation Plan. The purpose for which this Academy was founded. A test subject has finally volunteered for the project and has met all physical, emotional, and mental standards. Yasuke Matsuda’s work in the field of memory alteration has been enhanced extensively by ‘She Blinded Me With Science’ and his finding suggest that it is indeed possible for both Talent and Stand infusion to be simultaneous._

_Experiments with Stand Arrow implantation will begin as soon as test subject volunteers for Phase II of the Hope Cultivation Project._

A picture of five golden arrows all arranged in a line. Next to the pictures was information on reports on the Arrows themselves; what the pattern on the arrow-heads could mean, the virus found within the arrow itself, the biological research on the virus. It went on and on.

Dio narrowed his eyes as he read through the plan and mentally recorded the key details. The plan to erase memories and identity to create a blank slate to project Talents and Stands onto. The plan to create an ‘Ultimate Hope’ with which to push the world towards Hope. Dio was reminded of his own schemes; guiding mankind to Heaven through manipulation and sacrifice.

_Is this the work of fate?_ Dio pledged himself to investigate this further. There had to be a way for Dio to learn more about this ‘Hope Cultivation Plan’ and all its works. Stand Arrows? Talent infusion? All concepts that intrigued Dio.

He did not know it yet, but he had just discovered the path to Heaven. The way in which he would flood the old and flawed world with fire and death and build it anew under his own image and rule. A way for Dio Brando to cause The Biggest, Most Awful, Most Tragic Event in Human History.

Or The World's End, to some.
W-Wh-What have I done? Dio stared at Ryota from across the airport entrance. He couldn't even move from his place, left standing there like an idiot, as his friend looked at his watch with an unusually bored look. Did he lose his spirit as well? *I've ruined him!*

Ryota had taken Dio's threat too far. Fear of having food regurgitated into his mouth had driven him into a feeding frenzy like none other. Once, Ryota was a small and under-fed creatures with the eyes of a doe and an ability to seep into the background.

Now he had went for the other extreme. The person before Dio looked like he ate Ryota-no, like he ate two Ryotas-and all the weight went to his stomach. His cheeks were even rosy now! Ryota's cheeks were never meant to be rosy!

Pet Shop was smiling at this. The friend that he never truly respected had let himself go and the falcon found plenty of humour in that.

"Hush." Dio commanded, giving a side-glare to his bird. The falcon returned to its serious expression but couldn't hide the humour in its eyes. Its master was left to try damage control. "I can fix this. I can get him back to his proper state."

Yes, Ryota's thinness was partly from self-starvation, but that was part of his charm! What made him attractive to some. It played off Dio's towering figure and personality. The humble and fragile artist and the ambitious and invulnerable conqueror. The two that would change the world forever. They were a unit both in physique and in ambition.

Now Dio was going to have to find a way to help Ryota lose weight.

Ryota was approaching him. Dio would have to find a way to phrase it without shattering the fragile self-esteem of his friend. The wrong word could send his friend into a depression and possibly have him lose faith in himself again. Then the anime would never get done.

_Goddamn you, Ryota's useless parents and piece of crap classmates. This would be easier if I could simply say it bluntly. But, I have to be gentle now._ Dio decided to let Ryota lead the conversation and then suggest a weight-loss programme.

Yet there was a steel to Ryota's eyes, as he approached Dio, walking with a sense of confidence. It was if he was had more of a certainty about himself. It was nothing like Dio's own confidence, but it was there. Maybe he could be more direct with-"Are you Dio Brando?" The man asked. Dio's eyes widened at the question.

Ryota would never ask a question so bluntly. Ryota would never speak with such a suspicious edge.
to his voice. Ryota would never need to clarify that he was speaking to Dio.

This was not Ryota.

The imposter wasn't phased by Dio's shock. "We have a mutual friend. He'd have wanted to greet you himself but he's still recovering. Sick health." He said.

"He wasn't eating enough, was he?" Dio couldn't believe it. Ryota's passion was admirable. His refusal to stop trying to kill himself less so. Not-Ryota nodded, as Dio turned his attention to this person. "Who are you? I thought Ryota didn't go to classes. How do you know him?"

"My name is of no importance. Nor is my identity. Just know that, to the world, I am Ryota Mitarai now." The false Ryota replied. He turned his back on Dio and began to walk away.

Dio ignored the act of disrespect towards him. Not when he had been so easily fooled by this person. This was the Ultimate Imposter that the student files mentioned. There was no other way that someone could have fooled Dio like that. To make him think that his friend had changed so much rather than just seeing someone in disguise.

Even so! Dio should have noticed the rosy cheeks and the rapid weight-gain. Clear giveaways! Not to mention that the real Ryota would have been friendlier in greeting him from the start.

His only consolation was that the airport staff were busy loading his suitcases into the car that would go straight to the hotel. Dio himself already had a secret passage planned out for him and the false Ryota to take to whatever car had been arranged. They'd go to Hope's Peak and see Ryota there.

The ride over was silent and awkward as Pet Shop glared that the false Ryota. The only name Dio had been given was 'Sagishi'.

Dio's relief came when Ryota saw him enter the room and ran to give a hug. His arms barely made their way around Dio's chest to meet his back and Ryota took a few moments to realise why he had to send his imposter to pick Dio up.

The way his face became white and words babbled out of his mouth amused Dio. All Dio had to do was raise his right hand and wrap up from under Ryota's chin to squish his cheeks ever so slightly.

"I'm sorry, Dio. I know I let you down. But I hit a breakthrough. Five whole minutes were completed. By the time I noticed the stomach-aches..." Ryota's eyes had exploded with inspiration before dying down to shame. Shame that he had let Dio down. He looked up with desperation. "I'll be better next time!"

Dio chuckled to himself. "I can't stay mad at you. Not when I need someone who knows what they're talking about so much." He eyed Sagishi behind him, waiting for the imposter to leave.

"You don't need to worry about Sagishi. He's fine." Ryota said, giving Sagishi permission to stay, unfortunately.

The talk wasn't like Dio and Ryota's normal conversations; talks where they'd have traded philosophies and revelations as easily as water flowing from a tap. It was instead awkward and stilted and constantly waiting for the third party to say something. Dio couldn't feel calm in a room without some stranger sitting and watching over them.
Ryota tried to find something for both Dio and Sagishi to talk about, but it came to nothing.

Why the hell are you here, if you won’t contribute? Leave. Dio asked, noticing how Sagishi kept his focus on him. Watching him for any signs that he was dangerous. How dare he. I've know Ryota longer than he has and he acts like I'm the interloper?!

The way he just hung over the two of them like a bad scent angered Dio. Pet Shop hissed and squawked in his cage and had to be let out to roam the skies again. Dio and Ryota were left to try and talk about the only thing it was safe to talk about with Sagishi in the room.

Progress on Ryota’s anime.

An hour passed by as if it were a year. This was insane! By now, Dio would have felt like just a few seconds had passed while he and Ryota—the latter working away while conversing—would have spoken of the books Dio read since they last spoke. His way of playing catch-up after years of intellectual neglect.

They’d have discussed the philosophies that Dio had contemplated and the beautiful art-books that he found to admire and for Ryota to use in his works. They’d go over favourites and even speak of the world of Hope that was coming. The successes made in both their day-work of animating and fashion.

Instead, they wasted time going over their day and what time Dio would be able to visit Ryota again. Elevator-talk! All because Fatty probably realised that Ryota liked Dio more than him. Afraid he’d be alone and friendless again? Or that he wouldn’t get to play-pretend with someone else’s face?

Just looking at the man disgusted him. Dio did his best to hide it, but Ryota noticed anyway, and gave Fatty a worried look.

He finally took the hint and left. Now Ryota was silent and downcast.

"...Dio, do you not like Sagishi?" He asked. Dio only had to turn an eye to see that Ryota was shrinking in his seat. He sat in his work-chair whilst Dio lay by his bed. "It's fine if you don't, but he keeps the academic staff off my back by being me. And that means I have more time for the anime. For helping people find Hope."

"Ryota, if he's your friend then I can accept his presence. But remember that you trust too easily. You don't know who he is." Dio said. It wasn't the truth, but it was easier than explaining his distrust and dislike of Fatty. He did have his uses.

"I trust you and I trust Sagishi." Ryota replied. His expression shifted into an uneasy smile and fear-filled eyes. "Can you at least trust me on this?"

Dio only agreed to it because Ryota needed the cover. Hope’s Peak didn’t make class attendance mandatory, but you never knew who’d be too insistent about those things. It didn't mean he had to like it though.

Anyone who was able to trick him couldn’t be trusted. His walls were made to let nothing in. Anyone who could sneak past them risked being an enemy.

The sooner he'd attend Hope’s Peak, the better. He'd have a better eye on Ryota and they could
spend all the time together that they'd want. No more excuses. No more trickery. Just the two friends being together and discussing their future. Along with Ryota teaching Dio some of his techniques and Dio posing and voicing to help Ryota keep his character models accurate, and to improve the quality of his anime.

Fatty was a risk to Heaven. If Ryota kept opening his heart without hesitation, there would be distractions to his work, and it'd never be finished in time. They had to move quickly on this. Dio needed to begin the plan by next year at least. It wasn't supposed to be this quick a process. Ryota still thought they had more time.

But Dio had to account for Stands now.

He had to account for the Hope Cultivation Plan.

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So this was Izuru Kamukura.

The Ultimate Hope. The Perfect Stand-user. The man who could do anything and everything if he desired.

Dio looked in those red eyes, so much like his own, and saw nothing but the abyss. A complete void upon which there was nothing but darkness and cold. This wasn't even a human anymore. Hope's Peak took the memories and emotions and replaced them with Talent.

In giving him everything, they took away his drive. The need to evolve.

To think that this experiment had every Talent it was possible to record and store into a brain. To think that this was what Hope's Peak thought the pinnacle of humanity laid. It was disgusting. It was infuriating.

Dio Brando knew then where mankind's peak was and it was with him. A man who discovered the path to Heaven and the way for him, Dio, to control the fate of not only himself but of all humanity. A billion minds all working to decipher the riddle that plagued him.

He was finally at Hope's Peak himself. There was nothing stopping him from seeing Ryota and the two collaborating. There was nothing to stop Dio from spreading his word across the entire school and, with it, the world.

The fruits of the Hope Cultivation Plan was even right there for the taking! All Dio had to do was reach out and steal away the Stand Arrows and tame Izuru Kamukura. To use the tools that the Steering Committee wished to use for their own and make them his weapons.

What sort of madness had overtaken them? They had five of the most powerful tools in the world and they wasted two of them; the first trying to gain the virus within and only breaking the Arrow, and the second by implanting the Arrow into this science project. They didn't deserve the Arrows. Their punishment would be unforgiving.

But first he would have to recruit this...thing. This creature that could overcome any human and was still lesser than even the lowest of scum. There was nothing behind those eyes but boredom.
A being that never had to try and thus never saw meaning in the world around them. Did he think of himself as a higher being? Or would that be too much effort for him?

It infuriated Dio! Down to his very core! Izuru was looking at Dio, or maybe the bleeding scientist in his grip as security guards laid dead behind him, as if he was meant to entertain him somehow. An apathetic superiority.

Dio already had this shit with Byakuya Togami in his class. To think that Hope's Peak thought that being an inheritor was a Talent! It only reminded Dio of the importance of his task. Of the need for his rule over the entire planet and all who lived in it.

That will be for later. He reminded himself. Dio put on a new face; one that mocked the failed experiment before him and masked his contempt. For now, I, Dio, need this weapon on my side. If I am to attain Heaven, I need to end this threat before it begins.

"Do you even hate them for what they've done to you?" Dio asked, smirking as he took a step towards the caged animal. A room consisting of nothing but a bed; pathetic. "All that power. All that potential. Wasted on a lobotomised monkey that can only imitate the acts of a humans. To think that this is what was meant to be the Ultimate Hope.'

Izuru's eyes flickered with interest. Had this been the first time that he had ever been insulted? Was he so desperate to find an escape from the eternal boredom that he'd just sit there and take it? Dio's beliefs about this beast were only confirmed further.

There was a bright side still. For Dio now controlled the failed attempt at the Ultimate Hope in his hands. Now he owned the only thing that could stand up to him.

It only took a minute for Dio to learn where the remaining Stand Arrows were located.

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Dio Brando didn't hesitate.

If he hesitated, then he'd be doomed. There was no other option than to have faith in himself and believe that the Stand that would emerge from him would be one worthy of the ruler of this world. The one who would ascend to Heaven and take it.

He pierced the Stand Arrow through his heart and let the power seep through him. The soldiers waiting outside the locked door for the man in the balaclava, and Yasuke Matsuda waiting with his own Stand, all did their best to break in. They knew as well as he did that the right Stand could flatten worlds themselves.

They had no idea what they were up against.

Dio had learned many things since he discovered peace of mind. The way in which people could be driven to great and terrible things alike with only the light of Hope to guide them. How people yearned for a life free of fear and Despair. The power of those who had lost everything.

It was why the world he ruled over would truly be Heaven. People would have full knowledge of
their fate and Dio would be there to guide them forward. Ryota's anime brought Dio happiness because it offered him the knowledge he needed for so long.

Like Eve taking a bite from the apple, Dio became enlightened about the world, and about the power of Hope.

In turn, he realised how Despair could turn someone like him, with all the physical and intellectual ability he had, into a drunken wretch for so long. It was the loss of control over your own life. It was the madness that kept humanity from reaching its potential under him.

People needed to know what Hell was like, if they were to open their hearts to Heaven without question.

Dio felt like vomiting his guts out when the Arrow pierced into his skin. It fucking hurt! His heart twisted and turned inside him and his guts were set alight with sheer energy. He felt like screaming until his lungs were shrivelled bags of flesh and clawing at his face until he reached bone.

A series of rapid breathes came out and Dio almost thought of it as a mistake to use the Arrow so recklessly. What if he had done it wrong? But that would only worsen the situation. Hesitation was poison to the fighting spirit and Dio needed his spirit to survive.

_Calm down, Dio. It is only natural that evolution is a painful process. Simply remember the vision and let it guide you._ Dio told himself. Yet the burning feeling had now reached his skull. His vision became white light and he was sure that he died. That his organs ignited and incinerated every last part of him.

It was when words without sound were spoken in his mind, a voice so much like his own, that Dio stopped panicking and breathed. Peace of mind. He could not let fear win. He had to overcome this and be confident in his own strength. It is only natural for him to have such pain, when such power awaited.

_Will I need is my Stand, Holy Diver....36 souls who have sinned...I shall need a 'Friend' unmoved by political power, fame, wealth, or sexual desire...to ascend beyond myself...14 phrases....Go there and wait for...That's when Heaven will come..._

The light and words disappeared and Dio was back in the room. He turned towards the clock and held back a gasp. Had a mere second only passed? The howling and the agony was but a single second? Impossible!

Dio looked down at his hand and found that the Stand Arrow had removed itself from Dio's heart. There wasn't even a scar left! The Stand Arrow had felt Dio's drive, his certainty, his Hope, and judged him worthy of its power. It gave him a gift like none other.

He only had to turn around to see what it was. A fine creature that looked so much like himself with clear differences. The Stand had dark-purple skin and was the same size as Dio himself. Its head had two devil-like horns that spouted up from a draconic face that reminded Dio of his own, whilst blood-red eyes shined and gave it an aura that matched its demonic presence. It had three clawed fingers on each hand and its entire physique was much like Dio's own; lean yet muscular at the same time. It seemed strong enough to crush a man's hand with a bare fist.

_Only one way to test out that theory._ Dio said to himself as he began to walk towards the door. The chairs and barricades he threw behind them might have been a problem to remove without giving the
guards an incentive to just gun through the door. Any normal person would hesitate.

Not for Dio Brando and not for his Stand. The Stand that would usher forth the apocalypse and be the tool with which Dio used to bring about Heaven. Its fists moved quicker than sound in breaking apart metal and wood as if it was nothing. It was nothing; compared to the Stand's strength.

"You wish to do battle with me?" Dio yelled. The Stand threw back its fist and sent the door flying back with a single punch. He threw out his arms and waited for the guards to respond. "Then come! Know the terror of facing against the infinite power of Holy Diver!"

Holy Diver's strength allowed it to tear through bodies with a single punch. Its speed was enough that hundreds of bullets were caught and thrown before they even touched Dio. The precision enough that it could spot said bullets in the air and know when to catch them. The range was that of 10m, large enough that it could reach out and kill Dio's enemies, but short enough that it never strayed from his side.

Alone, it might have been enough, but Dio did not strive to be 'enough'. He strived to be on top. To be the greatest of all around him. Holy Diver was no different.

Dio knew by instinct alone what Holy Diver could do. With a single touch of either his own or Holy Diver's hands, injuries from a scratch to a bullet wound could be turned to nothing, as it was with any 'effect' on him that he wished gone. A mere pulse of energy would bring those who had died daring to challenge Holy Diver back to life. As his servants, naturally, but that was a fair price for trying to kill him in the first place.

There was a third power. One that sent a chill down even Dio's spine, but he did not use it here. He could not use it here. The power needed to supply such a terrifying and unrivalled power was not available to him. It was one that would need the souls of many to supply even a single use.

Not that he needed it. Holy Diver exterminated all those who tried to bring him to their flawed justice. To save a world that was slowly decaying.

Yasuke Matsuda was his largest challenge but even the Ultimate Neurologist fell to him. The boy was smart and had a tactical mind for battle. But he never fought another Stand user in his life and did not have Dio's advantage in knowledge. His attacks were easily negated and his defences crushed.

It was no task finishing him off when Dio had legions of soldiers willing to surround and butcher his enemy for him. Culling them again was especially easy when they just stood there and let you do it.

Dio stood on a field of corpses and blood. The only one who could dare to rival him was locked away in his room and already swore himself to Dio. None could challenge him now. He had the Stand Arrows and he had Izuru Kamukura on his side.

The world that Hope's Peak tried so hard to maintain and control was doomed to die. Mankind would look upon Dio as God himself; both destroyer and creator. Hope and Despair combined into one. He would be someone who was greater than all the Talents before him.

I, Dio, will be the Ultimate Master. He who rules over Heaven and decides the course of fate itself. Dio's ascension was only a matter of time and manpower now. He had already won and merely needed to collect the necessary pieces.
There was only one thing that he felt the desperate need to do. He would need to grab Pet Shop from the entrance of this facility where he left his falcon, with the orders to disrupt any reinforcements, and rush on over to the dormitories.

Ryota had to know about this.

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Mitarai felt a soft force shaking him awake. It was still pitch-dark except for a lamp's soft glow just next to his computer, still bright enough to blind him, and leave his vision fuzzy when he regained some of his senses. He could barely see the outline of a shape just by his bed as it began to speak.

"Ryota, don't panic." The voice was Dio's and Mitarai finally recognised him. Pet Shop even sat on top of the bookshelves he used for his collections, staring down at him with disdainful eyes. What was Dio even doing-

Dio threw down his hand and Mitarai felt his chest open and close for half a second. The blood seeped out and stained his sheets and grew larger and there was pain because there was an arrow sticking out of his chest. Mitarai looked up at Dio's grinning face.

He screamed at the top of his lungs. The pain wasn't as bad as he thought but he was still being stabbed in the chest! With an arrow! There was a burning feeling over his body as Dio yanked out the arrow and the blood kept spilling out from the now-open wound.

This is a dream. This is just a terrible, terrible dream. Mitarai told himself. Anything to keep himself calm.

Dio wasn't forsaking their friendship. This wasn't just one long elaborate scheme of revenge. The talks, the bond, the idea of making everyone happy, that wasn't just Dio readying to torment him. He wasn't like the other! He didn't hate him!

Mitarai didn't want to die. He wanted to make the anime that would save everyone. That would bring Hope to everyone who needed it. He looked down at his chest as tears rushing down his face, at the sight of the-

No longer bleeding chest. The injury that didn't hurt anymore. Mitarai threw his stained covers off and lifted his ruined pyjama shirt up and saw only red stains on his chest. It was as if he was never injured.

What?! I don't-Dio had the-The Arrow-What?! Mitarai was so confused! He wasn’t complaining about not-bleeding and not-hurting, but still very confused!

He was totally awake now and finally saw that grin on Dio's face. That grin whenever he knew something that Mitarai didn't and taunted him with just that smile alone. That grin that told Mitarai that Dio knew perfectly well that the Arrow wouldn't hurt him!

That...that...total dick.

"I didn't mean to wake you up at three in the morning, but once you see this you'll-" Dio wasn't allowed to finish as Mitarai leapt up from his bed and started slamming his fists against Dio's chest.
He was striking at Dio with all his force! "Ryota, what are you doing?"

"I'm hitting you because you are an absolute self-aggrandising, manipulating, not-funny jerk! Why did you do that? It really hurt! I really thought that you wanted to kill me!" Mitarai shouted as he continued his assault. It was like hitting a thick steel wall.

Mitarai was already catching his breath as he put too much effort into those first punches. He was never the most athletic kid and spending all of his time working on the anime wasn't good for his physical ability.

All Dio needed to do was reach out and take Mitarai's face in his hand. He looked down with soft eyes and moved in so that there were only inches between them.

"Ryota, I'd never betray you like that. We're friends, and friends never betray one another. They keep their secrets and never break their trust. You trust me, don't you?" Dio asked. Mitarai bit his lip as he nodded, to Dio's amusement. "Look behind me." He said.

"What are you-" Mitarai stopped as stood on the bed to see the giant monster behind Dio.

This time he only scream for about three seconds before everything went dark for him. All he felt were a pair of strong arms catching him as he fell before he was trapped in darkness.

At least the dream had finally ended. Now he could just wake up.

It was still early morning and he immediately went from being asleep to being awake. That dream definitely did its job of waking him up. He definitely didn't want a dream like that again.

Mitarai didn't know how much time had passed for him. He awakened to find himself resting in the arms of a demon, while Dio leaned towards him with that same smile that said 'Guess what I know, Ryota?'

"You were down for a few minutes. I, Dio, used Holy Diver to catch you before you hit your head on the wall." Dio explained. Mitarai looked down at his red pyjamas, where they had once been navy-blue, and blushed. "Yes, you did need a change in pyjamas. The shirt was bloody and the trousers were, well, I won't say anything on that. A shame. The blue silk ones looked good on you."

"Just saying that 'cause you bought them." Mitarai replied, not pouting. Dio could be great for conversation, but other times he was a total- "Wait! You stabbed me with an Arrow, a-and there was a demon behind you and it's holding me and-"

"Why don't you let me explain?" Dio would have gotten a pillow to the face and a demand to get out for a few minutes, if it wasn't for that look. No tricks. No smugness. Just a sincere desire to tell Mitarai what the hell was going on.

I can trust Dio. If I can't trust him, then I can't trust anyone. Mitarai had faith in his friend and nodded. Dio pointed up towards the bookshelf where Mitarai could see Pet Shop staring down on him. Now it had a friend with it.

Friend was the wrong word for it. There was probably a proper term for a ice-skinned bird creature with the face of a Pterodactyl's skeleton, a body long as a centipede's, and six arms spouting bird talons. It might have been the same term as for Dio's demon.
He just had no idea what it was.

Dio explained it to him. They were called 'Stands', as in spirits that were 'standing by' their user, and they were manifestations of life energy and fighting spirit. The Arrow that Dio had was one of three in his possession and had a virus in the arrow-head. The virus was what caused Dio, Pet Shop, and Mitarai to gain these powers.

It only worked on those with enough spirit to sustain the Stands. If not, they could go rogue and cause a lot of destruction. Mitarai was confused. If weak people were cursed by the Arrow, then why wasn't he cursed? He wasn't strong like Dio or Pet Shop; he never won a fight in his life.

Mitarai wouldn't deny, though, that Dio's own confusion at his views didn't cheer him up.

"You have an inner strength. A strength that is far beyond most normal humans. Just because it's not physical doesn't mean it isn't real. Could the Ultimate Fighter create the path to Heaven? Who else can bring Hope to the world? Who else could have given I, Dio, Hope?" Dio put a hand on Mitarai's shoulder and kept a firm grip.

Mitarai couldn't look at Dio. He was already shaking and he didn't want his friend to think he was being a baby. But he couldn't help it. Dio did believe in him! He always said it, but there was a part of Mitarai that feared it wasn't true. That he was just being humoured.

Dio was the perfect person to fall into Despair. No one would have been surprised if he did. A father that terrorised his mother to the grave and sold away the last shreds of her memory for booze. A chance to escape poverty then turned into losing control of your life as the people around you take what's yours. Lost in a sea of anger and fear and uncertainty without any guiding light.

He could have fallen into Despair. He almost did. No one would have cared. If Mitarai hadn't bumped into Dio on that night, he didn't want to think about where and who his friend would be now. There was a confidence in him. A sense that he was doing right. If he could save Dio... I can save everyone. I know I can.

A soft grip on his right thigh, just opposite of where Dio was, caught his attention. Who was grabbing at him?

Mitarai turned and widened his eyes. This was-? His Stand?!

It wasn't anything like Dio's Holy Diver, large and almost terrifying in its form, or like Pet Shop's 'Horus' in how it almost extended out from the body. It was a smaller version of him. Almost like a chibi-Mitarai, only the difference was that it was hearing a dark blue jacket, black trousers with white shoe, and a giant fuzzy top-hat.

Not to mention that it was inside the outline of a cube, the white lines going through Mitarai's body without the sensation of touch, from where it shyly waved. Mitarai saved back and turned to Dio so that he could show him.

Only he found Dio more concerned with seeing Holy Diver shadow-box. It was definitely impressive in how it moved. Mitarai could see the after-images of a dozen arms as Holy Diver threw punch after punch at thin air. Pet Shop watched it deeply without even giving a second glance to Mitarai.

Maybe they were waiting for his Stand to appear. A big and burly thing just like theirs. Not
something tiny and small.

*We'll show them what tiny and small can do. Isn't that right...* Mitarai stared at his Stand for a few moments, trying to think of a name, before he felt a whisper. It didn't come from Dio or the Stand, but his own heart. *Virtual Insanity.*

The cube outline expanded, going through Mitarai's body and then through Dio, Pet Shop, and their own Stands before it reached every corner and edge of Mitarai's bedroom. If Dio saw the white outline, he didn't show it, but he must have felt the touch because he was turning to Mitarai.

*If he wants to play tricks, I can play tricks.* Mitarai tried to understand what it was that *Virtual Insanity* could do. It had to be figured out before Dio looked at him. Time slowed to a crawl as he willed for something to happen. Anything to distract Dio's vision.

That was when Mitarai saw a white outline of himself stand up from the bed.

Dio and Pet Shop's eyes turned to the white outline of Mitarai as it stood still. The real Mitarai tried to think of something to keep their attention. Dio was one of the most observant people that he knew. It'd be a second before he realised that this wasn't Mitarai. He had to show some sign of life!

"Do you see it yet, Dio? My Stand?" Mitarai didn't hear that voice. The voice that must have sounded so much like his own.

"No. I don't see it at all. Ryota, are you sure your Stand is in the room?" Dio asked. His attention fully focused on the Mitarai-outline.

Those weren't his words. They were words, but they appeared as kanji above his head, as if they were subtitles on an anime. Was this the power of *Virtual Insanity*? To create an illusion of himself? Mitarai felt *Virtual Insanity* jumping onto his lap as he looked down on it.

He could see how it worked. There was a pen in its hand that it used to draw out small white outlines of objects, such as a tiny ball that levitated from Mitarai's work station and towards the Mitarai-outline. The fake-him grabbed it and threw it in the air where *Virtual Insanity* then waved its pen to the right and the ball went in that direction.

Dio and Pet Shop were captivated! Why wouldn't they be? They must have thought that Mitarai's Stand had something to do with the ball they were seeing. He could see the outlines of the kanji that spelt out the onomatopoeia for a ball flying away and back towards the fake Mitarai.

*It can manipulate perceptions of sight and sound. It's just like my Talent. The Ultimate Animator who can create real-life projections of his work.* Mitarai was amazed. This was the power of his Stand!

Holy Diver was the perfect Stand for Dio in all its towering presence and ability to emit an aura of sheer overwhelming personality. *Virtual Insanity*, in turn, was the perfect Stand for Mitarai. It created illusions with which he could show the real world and remain safe. The range seemed connected to the white outlines themselves, which stopped at the confines of his room, which created new questions.

Questions that could be answered later. Right now, he was having fun playing a little prank of his own on Dio. If a certain someone decided that stabbing a friend with an arrow was fun; then messing with them was fair game too. Mitarai had *Virtual Insanity* up the ante.
The ball was now flying at enough speed to generate its own wind. It spun around the Mitarai-outline a hundred times before it spawned another ball. Pet Shop stepped back with calculating eyes while Dio's attention was caught in the illusion.

Holy Diver moved to try and catch the ball but Mitarai was too quick. The ball looked like it accelerated in speed and went just over Holy Diver's hand as it tried to catch it. Mitarai made the outline grin which Dio replied with his own.

Pet Shop cried out and Dio briefly gave his falcon a moment of time before slowly turning his head back towards the illusion cast by Virtual Insanity. It almost felt like Dio was looking at the real Mitarai; yet his eyes didn't show any recognition of him. At least, that was what Mitarai thought.

That was when Dio moved his right hand towards his face and closed his eyes. He touched his eyelids with his thumb and index finger before lowering them again and opening his eyes.

Directly at where Mitarai was sitting and laughing to himself. Well, he wasn't laughing anymore.

"How did you manage to break out of Virtual Insanity's-"

"Very funny, Ryota. Your Stand is certainly an impressive one to have fooled even I, Dio. To create illusions with such skill. I knew your Stand would be great." Dio said, before he gave that lousy smirk that reminded Mitarai of who he was talking to. "But mine's better."

"That doesn't answer my question." Mitarai mumbled. Virtual Insanity cancelled its illusion and joined its master in folding its arms in disappointment.

"You're very light. Just not light enough to not leave an impression on your bed. Pet Shop noticed and I quickly noticed it when it called me." Dio chuckled to himself. "Just how long were you going to keep that up."

"Until you learned why you shouldn't stab people with arrows without getting permission. No matter how magic they are." Mitarai replied.

"It gave you your Stand." Dio said. He only laughed again when he saw Mitarai's glare and ruffled his hair. "It's useless to expect an apology from me."

Yeah, because you have the stupidest Stand ever. Mitarai thought to himself.

That was how they spent the rest of the morning. Talking about what powers their Stands had, what their limitations were, and how amazing it was that Dio had these Stand Arrows. It wasn't much different to their usual conversations.

Virtual Insanity didn't just manipulate perceptions of sight and sound, but it could alter other things. The atmosphere.

Not as in the physical atmosphere, but the atmosphere for the room. The shared collective feeling that decided when a joke was or wasn't appropriate or funny. The way that a single sentence, more than a change in the temperature, could make someone once-composed become a sweaty mess. Or how a room could appear like it was closing in on you despite not changing size.

That 'atmosphere' could be manipulated with the right changes to sight and sound perception. Not
that it ever got far with Dio. A single touch on the eyes, ears, or even just the head of Dio from himself or Holy Diver and it was like Virtual Insanity didn't even effect him in the first place.

Dio's Holy Diver could negate effect that applied to him, bring back the dead, and even erase things from reality. Mitarai thought the first power reflected Dio himself. Always able to keep on moving despite what life threw at him. The other powers were just life compensating Dio for the first years of his life a bit too much.

Virtual Insanity's limitations were only restricted to the size of the room itself. His bedroom, his bathroom, and even the hallways could become the stage for Virtual Insanity. So long as Mitarai was indoors, Virtual Insanity could cast its illusions.

But it had weaknesses. The main one being that he couldn't use it outside. No matter what he did, the white outlines unleashed by Virtual Insanity's pen turned to nothing and the cube-outline phased away. A pretty big weakness, if you asked Mitarai. There were other things, like what senses he could manipulate and the need to constantly create new ones, but that was the main one.

They agreed to keep this a secret. Sagishi would just worry about Mitarai if he revealed how he got these powers, and say how he didn't trust Dio. Sometimes, Mitarai wished his only two friends would get along better. They had so much in common! They'd just be offended if he said to them, though.

Dio didn't say where exactly he got the Arrows from and that'd just have to be good enough for Mitarai. If he was trusted enough to be given a Stand then he was trusted enough. Even if he hadn't been, he'd keep Dio's secret.

Friendship meant standing by one another and never betraying them. It meant keeping secrets given in confidence and having faith that they were making the right decisions. Dio trusted Mitarai with so much and had been so kind to him. He'd been there through thick and thin for him, over these months.

Now he was in Hope's Peak himself. They'd be spending time together! Without worrying about the press intrusions! All the more reason that they had to stick together. Mitarai would keep Dio's secrets hidden for as long as he needed to.

Friendship was built on trust and Mitarai would always trust Dio.

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Dio had to pack Ryota's things quickly. He couldn't be noticed. Not now. People would ask questions.

It'd be better if he waited a few days to begin the plan. It'd be easier to get Ryota settled into his new work station if he had time to transition into it rather than moving entire computer set-ups and libraries of DVDs and books and even food and drink. Dio was having trouble getting it done in one day.

I can't even use Holy Diver. I can't afford the attention. Dio knew that Hope's Peak were on the look-out for the Arrows. If even a single student saw something invisible holding onto a computer or a box, all suspicion would fall on him.
No. He needed to keep cover.

The only problem was that Ryota would tell Fatty about it. No. If Dio made him promise not to tell, then he wouldn't tell, he trusted that from his friend, but Fatty would notice that Ryota was keeping a secret. His ability to tell when someone was lying was creepy as shit, but it was almost a Talent itself.

Who even was this person that intruded into Ryota's life? He was useful in keeping Class 77-B's teacher off Ryota's back, but did he have to mother Ryota so much?!

Dio could have taken care of Ryota fine. He could have booked a personal doctor who knew to keep secrets and wouldn't have Ryota show his face in public. What if Fatty had been caught in his little schme? Their plans would be set back years!

Fatty was probably already wondering about Virtual Insanity. Ryota never showed him the Stand in action, yet Dio could tell he was suspecting something.

That was why Dio told Ryota of the need to move now. It was a testament to Ryota's trust in their friendship that he accepted this on Dio's request alone. Holy Diver was the perfect Stand for carefully placing every last bit of the equipment into the right boxes. Its speed and strength meant that they were packed and ready in just twenty minutes.

The room below the statue was already set-up for Ryota to continue as if it was always his room. The anime was being worked on as they spoke. It'd be harder for Dio to make his 'edits', using what Ryota had taught him, but he didn't need to be complex.

The trigger he'd be adding would be more than enough to compensate.

The final suitcase was being stuffed in when Dio heard the door open. A soft whimper and a confused noise came from the open gap and Dio already had Holy Diver ready to strike. Who was intruding? Was it Fatty?

No. Dio recognised the girl hiding behind the door, looking at him with misty and confused eyes, as she gazed at Dio. Fatty must have sent her. He had worked hard to avoid the attention of Ryota's minder and instantly recognised the girl before him.

The long, uneven, choppy purple hair, greyish-purple eyes, the beauty-mark just under her left eye, and the bandage on her left cheek told Dio who she was. This was Ryota's nurse, one of Fatty's classmates, who'd likely been sent to investigate where Ryota had gone.

Mikan Tsumiki.

Damn it. What are you people? He doesn't need this kind of mothering. Dio glared at Mikan and readied Holy Diver. Until he realised the opportunity facing him.

She might be useful for keeping an eye on Ryota. The fact that she had seen him in Ryota's room itself meant that she couldn't be allowed to leave and report this. It'd also keep Ryota from missing his classmates too much if one of them was missing.

Dio's glare turned into a smirk as he glided towards Mikan.

Yes. She would do very nicely.
"I think my plan, before I discovered the infinite power of Holy Diver, was reliant on many assumptions," Dio said. "The assumption that people across the world would be watching at the same time, that they would make others watch it, and that I, Dio, would be in a position to take power quickly."

"Certain graduates, in their final examination, display their Talents to an audience often consisting of important figures both inside and outside the Academy. You were planning on convincing Ryota Mitarai to include a message emphasising loyalty towards you by that point. You'd be in control of numerous people."

Izuru Kamukura was a good person for Dio to speak to. Ryota was good for bouncing questions and answers off of, but Kamukura had his own uses. One of those being to sit down, be talked to, and respond when needed. He knew the proper moments where Dio wanted elaboration.

"Indeed. It would be spread from those people to their friends and family, their co-workers, their bosses, their assistants, and so on. People would watch Ryota's epic and carry the message of Heaven in their hearts."

"Like a meme."

"Don't be ridiculous." Dio snapped. He knew what Kamukura meant, but the word had taken on a childish meaning. No. A better word was needed. "A virus. A virus of Hope and peace of mind that would bring all the people on Earth towards a common goal. To interpret the visions I saw with pure peace of mind and turn it to reality. To grant me the power to change the world with but a touch."

A noise came from the chair facing the computer. A cry for mercy? A laugh of pleasure? Who knew? Dio could if he simply approached the chair and looked at the face of the person sitting in it. But he wished to preserve the mystery for a while longer.

_The straps are at least working._ Dio would have been distracted with having Holy Diver keep them in place to really speak aloud with Kamukura. The failed experiment would have had to be out of the room and away from where Boulevard of Broken Dreams could copy Holy Diver.

"And then you discovered Stands." Izuru said.

Dio smirked. "Yes, I discovered the Izuru Kamukura Project; a plan to create a perfect being who could command both Talent and Stands. Using ancient weapons from the stars that they knew nothing about, Hope's Peak created you, and then created the methods by which I, Dio, could ascend to Heaven. It gave me the power to change the world with my own two hands, rather than relying on Ryota's lessons."

Just as Ryota taught Dio how to animate, Dio taught Ryota some techniques that would allow someone of his small stature to defend himself. A man who trained himself in the boxing styles of Ogre Street-mostly concerned with punching out eyes and breaking bones-and expanded into MMA, could easily teach Ryota the merits of a quick eye-jab.

But it was Ryota who gave him the greater weapon. Dio's skill was rudimentary; he could only
piggy-back off on Ryota's own skills, but it was enough.

The sight of Izuru Kamukura's arm piercing through the stomachs of a couple trying to take control of their deaths, if they were fated to die here, would be enough to break most. If not the image of the girl in the yellow-rabbit hoodie having her skull literally crushed between his hands.

Dio inhaled and exhaled. The thrill of the battle! The sheer power he held in his hands as Holy Diver tore through the Student Council as if they were paper! It was exhilarating! No drug could compare to the high that he experienced.

The only ones who put up a real fight was the tall muscular one and the small blue-haired member who shared Ryota's name. The former had strength and skill to him, but was nothing compared to Holy Diver. The latter had a spirit to him. A worthy Stand-user, if Dio had been in the mood to recruit.

His reward for courage, however, was merely a quick death compared to the suffering of the others.

The Student Council Extermination was still showing on the computer, even as its viewer had stopped squealing and crying, and was reaching the final act. Dio would have to hurry this up.

"Holy Diver. A Stand that can negate all effect on myself that I desire negated with a single touch. The power to resurrect the dead as servants. And even the power to," Dio stopped himself. Izuru could find out what that did for himself. "Well, the power to change reality as I see fit. Fate has rewarded me time and time again when I hit a roadblock. It reminded me of a valuable lesson."

"What was that?"

"People do not search for Hope when they are content. Stagnation is an endless loop of being happy enough with mediocrity and being too fearful of change to remove the...inefficiencies. Better to play it safe than to risk it all." Dio slowly walked towards the seat in the room. He was lucky that Ryota had chosen to venture into the other rooms of this lair. There was an exploring spirit in him that Dio couldn't resist indulging.

"So you take away that stability. Force people into a crisis."

"Hope is pre-determined harmony, where you live a life of peace and certainty, gently moving towards your fate. Despair is when you are no longer certain. Are you moving towards your dream, or the dream of others? Are you living up to your full potential? Am I loved? Am I hated? Uncertainty breeds fear and anger. Fear of failure and anger at your circumstances. That is why we Despair.

"I, Dio, spent so long in Despair before Ryota showed me his work. His techniques revealed the happiness I sought for so long and focused my mind towards the future. It let me see into a world where there was no uncertainty. Where no one lives in fear. All have peace of mind and move towards their fate. Heaven. I, Dio, rule over this world from above and control not only my own fate, but the fate of mankind itself."

Dio placed a hand on the right arm-rest of the seat and pushed the other through the hair of the person in the seat. She had been so happy to sit down and watch Dio's work in the beginning. He mostly said that this was the result of his lessons with Ryota. Learning how to animate (and use subliminal messaging) and other things.
Putting in the straps was the only hard part, but she was so obedient to not fight against them, even when she saw the Student Council. By the time that the killing began, she was already firmly tied down and couldn't escape. Dio had to keep her eyes open for the initial parts, at least until she stopped fighting.

It was amazing how you could avoid these techniques with the proper training. Ryota had been forced to learn on the fly when adding them to his own anime and managed to help Dio with it as well.

The two of them together could do anything.

"You create a great evil to destroy the Hope they know. Send them into a world of nothing but chaos, death, and Despair. A world where all that they had trust and faith in is subverted or destroyed." Izuru said, still looking forward without a single shred of interest.

Not that Dio cared. Interest wasn't the point.

"I will create a Despair like none other. A Despair that will flood the world and destroy all in its path. Mankind will have never known such terror as the one I, Dio, will unleash upon them," Dio smiled as he looked down on the woman in the chair. He wiped away some of the dribble running down her chin. "But it cannot be from myself. Not directly. It must be done in my name to spread fear and create a sense that I am greater than them. But the direct perpetrators must be someone else. Someone who represents the death of the old world.

"An Ultimate Despair. Formed from the very children who went to the beacon of Hope for the old world. The pillars that held the world up will be shattered by those trusted to maintain and strengthen them. Friends. Family. Love. All of that will mean nothing to them. Only two things in this world will matter to them. The second to their hearts will be the Despair they bring to all, including themselves,"

Dio turned her head up towards him so that he could see the look in her eyes, moving the hand in her hair to her cheek. The red swirls that span endlessly in her eyes and the soft giggles that bubbled out of her mouth the second she saw him. Dio smiled as he beheld the fruits of his labour. The culmination of his efforts.

Mikan looked up at him with adoring, despairing eyes, as she moved to kiss the hand holding her cheek. A show of absolute submission and love.

"The first in their hearts, the one who will command their ever-lasting loyalty and love, will be I, Dio." Dio grinned as he removed his hands from Mikan. She let out a soft whine as a silent Pet Shop glowered at her from its cage.

This was it. The first step in creating the people who would lead his army across the world and burn it all in his name. They would murder their families for Dio. They would tear their friends apart for Dio. They would become slaves to the whims and desires of Dio.

Their fates would belong to him just as Mikan's now did. All Dio had to do was wait for the right moment and then everything would change.

The World's End was coming.
"Do you guys have to be so loud?" Mitarai grumbled as he kept on working.

It wasn't that he was upset that Dio and Tsumiki were apparently together, but did they have to be so...vocal in their affections? Dio was a pretty domineering guy, you could tell that just from looking at him, but he always thought Tsumiki would be the quiet type.

Then again, she did cry loudly after seeing his anime. But it was the good kind of crying. Maybe she was like that with boyfriends?

Pet Shop glowered, well slight more than usual, at the couple. Dio was resting on Mitarai's bed as Tsumiki latched herself onto him with both legs and arms. She was doing her best to nuzzle her whole body against him while he just laid there and basked in the attention. Sometimes he kissed her and others times he moved his hands down certain parts.

All the while Mitarai worked on his anime and prayed Dio wouldn't stain his bed. There wasn't a washing machine or a dry-cleaner down here. He checked!

"Are we disrupting your work, Ryota?" Dio asked. Mitarai kept himself from turning lest he see Tsumiki all sweaty and heated.

"Aaa, it's so amazing to see Dio and Mitarai be so friendly. Dio is sooo kind." Tsumiki hugged Dio tighter as Pet Shop let out a squawk of irritation.

"How did you two even end up together? I thought you weren't into dating, Dio."

"What can I say? I didn't want to refuse her when she asked so nicely," Dio replied, chuckling to himself. Oh brother, Dio probably enjoyed the ego-boost it was giving him. "She was captivated by my charisma. Isn't that right, Mikan?"

"Yep." Tsumiki moaned and it took all of Mitarai's willpower to not turn and ask if they were really going to go to second base on his bed. "Dio's power. His personality. His everything. I just can't resist it. I want to be with him wherever he goes and whatever he does. I wanna be a part of him forever."

A bit creepy, but Sagishi did say that she had a rough time. A lot of bullying and mistreatment. Just like he had been. Maybe she was just overly affectionate when people were kind to her. Mitarai knew that Dio didn't like it when girls were clingy or demanded stuff of him.

So to simply just lay there and smile peacefully to himself was amazing. Dio's temper wasn't flared once.

"Maybe you will, Mikan, maybe you will. But Ryota, if we are being loud, we'll go somewhere else." Dio leaned over from the bed so that Tsumiki wasn't completely straddling him anymore. "I want you to be as calm and at peace as much as I feel when I'm with you."

Mitarai shrunk in his seat to hide the blush on his face. He made Dio feel calm and at peace with himself? It wasn't like Dio made it a secret that he liked being with Mitarai. He even gave Mitarai a Stand just so they could share it with each other.
Dio had seemed excited, almost tense, for so long that Mitarai thought he was dealing with something. Only now he seemed relaxed. As if everything was going to go his way because he's Dio Brando. It was a welcome return compared to the frenzy before.

"It's not that you're being too loud. Just remember that there's more than you two in the room."
Mitarai replied. He turned to face Dio, who had a soft smile on his face, and Tsumiki, who had a giant smile and was salivating at the sight of Dio.

_Does he have to have his shirt off? It's really distracting._ Mitarai had sketched out Dio's form before. Not naked or anything! It was just for character reference since Mitarai lacked any other muscled people to model on. But looking at his friend shirtless was a weird experience.

Not as weird as he thought it'd be, but that might have come from sketching and being in the same bed. Not that they were sleeping together, but sometimes Dio's visits went on a bit long and he didn't want to go all the way back to his dorm. He'd then insist Mitarai come to bed as well! It wasn't his fault the bed was large enough to fit two people in it!

The way that Tsumiki stroked at the abs as if they were valued treasures, the biceps that throbbed when Dio stroked his hand over Tsumiki's curves, and the way that they formed what was a perfect body. Gah! Mitarai himself was losing himself in how well-sculptured it was.

This was why Dio Brando was the Ultimate Male Model. He just had that magnetism that drew everyone, men and women, towards him. That was just his looks!

How many people knew about the way he could devour a book? How many people knew of the tracts of philosophy he could unleash in a single hour? His patience when in discussion with someone he respected?

No one knew Dio Brando better than Ryota Mitarai, and no one knew Ryota Mitarai better than Dio Brando. That was the true nature of their friendship. They understood one another. They stabilised one another. They calmed one another.

Mitarai was happy for his friend. If he wanted to go out with Tsumiki, then more power to them, even if they could get a bit too physical around others-mainly him. All he hoped was that Pet Shop would like her. Tsumiki was normally on the edge of tears just standing there. Imagine if she was bullied by that falcon?

_Dio would handle it. Pet Shop would let her be if Dio told him to._ Mitarai couldn't have thought of a better boyfriend for her.

"We'll try to keep the noise in mind." Dio said, putting a hand on Tsumiki's chest to keep her back. His eyes flashed with annoyance at Tsumiki's attempt to kiss him, but that turned back to a calm smile. He turned back to her. "I've been thinking of meeting your classmates, Mikan. The class you've told me so much about."

"W-Wha-What?" Mitarai stuttered out. Tsumiki had the biggest smile on her face while Mitarai was left to stare in horror.

Dio closed his eyes and laughed softly. "I won't reveal your secret, Ryota. But I already know her and your imposter. Why shouldn't I meet them? I'm a student at Hope's Peak, so it's just getting to know my upperclassmen better."
"If you think that's for the best." Mitarai replied, uneasy about the implications of that.

From what he had been told by Sagishi, Class 77-B were a really loud and energetic group of people. They were kind, but also very loud and willing to talk about personal lives. The kind of details they'd naturally dig into wasn't really the kind of stuff that Dio shared.

Or maybe he felt like it'd be like his own Class. Dio had told Mitarai about the people he met. The Ultimate Moral Compass who acted as the school-wide hall monitor, the Ultimate Progeny who tested Dio's patience, the Ultimate Gambler who intrigued him, the Ultimate Fighter who tested him as the barrier he couldn't overcome alone, the Ultimate Detective whose mind was a match for Dio's own, and even the Ultimate Lucky Student.

Makoto Naegi. Dio liked him for his open heart and willingness to play by Dio's rules when it came to talking to him. He never disagreed entirely but merely offered ideas. His Luck was also interesting to Dio. The only thing he could never predict.

The way he smiled and laughed at those antics reminded Mitarai of how he'd smile and laugh with him. It felt almost wrong that Dio was sharing this with another person. Was this how he felt when Mitarai had those moments with Sagishi?

No. Mitarai was not being jealous of someone he never met.

It would have made sense if he was. Dio Brando was the kind of guy you only met once in a lifetime. He'd been there for Mitarai so many times. He inspired him when others put him down. He pushed Mitarai when he felt like stopping. They both dreamed of Heaven; a world of Hope and peace for everyone.

If Dio thought he should meet Class 77-B then Mitarai wouldn't get in his way. He trusted Dio to react the right way to their antics and to treat them properly. He just hoped they'd get along.

Oh, who was he kidding? Dio would have them eating out of the palm of his hand in an instant.

So, ignoring the sounds of Dio and Mikan making out again, and Pet Shop's soft grumbles at having to be restrained, Mitarai continued his work. It'd take another year, maybe two if nothing big happened, but he was nearing completion.

Virtual Insanity helped him avoid tunnel vision by training it further. It was just a shame that he could only see the outline of his illusions, otherwise he'd use it on himself to muffle the noise. Which meant he was going to have to work through the noise.

Still, Mitarai was sure that today was going to be a great day.

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Stand Stats

**Virtual Insanity**

*User: Ryota Mitarai*

**Stats**

Destructive Power: D

Speed: B
Range: B
Durability: C
Precision: B
Developmental Potential: A

**Abilities**
Stand's effects are negated by natural light and cannot work outside. Does not apply to light shining in from surfaces like windows, but if the window is open, then all light shining in will cut through the illusion. Range is determined by preference of user, but is limited to the ends of the enclosed space where Stand is activated i.e. where natural light begins.

User can alter perceptions of sight and sound within the range of surroundings. Relies on user input for manipulation. Sight perception is effected when looking into the area effected, but not sound, even when unknown to the user.

User can control 'atmosphere' of the room. No physical changes to the room, but can create perception of an environment that inspires emotional and mental changes in targets. 'Atmosphere' is restored when size of enclosed space is changed i.e. window or door is opened.
"Do you think they'll get in?" Fujisaki asked, staring outside the window. She sounded worried. Rightfully so as more Reserve Course students leapt over the gate.

They'd be beaten back, as they always were, but the numbers of those who got in were rising. The same went with their methods, which were gradually becoming more violent. It'd only be a matter of time before some of them would break in and then who knows what would happen?

Just as Dio planned it.

Oowada put a large hand on Fujisaki's shoulder and gave her the thumbs-up. "Look kid, don't sweat it. Worse comes to worse, we'll kick 'em out before they even come close to touching you."

"Yeah, we're not some minimum-wage security patrol. We'll kick ass if we need to." Kuwata said, pointing a thumb to Oogami, who was busy sitting with Asahina on the other side of the room. "We've even got the Ogre on-side."

"Kuwata!" Asahina shouted. She always took the moniker more personally than the Ogre herself.

"I meant it as a compliment. No one's gonna fight Oogami. Most of these guys are only there because all their friends are." Kuwata backtracked.

"Common rabble who only find courage when they have superior numbers. If they can't get past a gate, I doubt stairs will be in their joint intellectual capacity." Togami scoffed at the thought. Naturally, the inheritor would be so arrogant as to dismiss this revolution.

"They'll likely get tired sooner or later. Ideally, it'll end before the disruption is too much." Celestia said, not even looking out the window as she sketched a castle of some kind.

Yamada stroked his chin as he continued his own, much less sophisticated, sketches. "Yes, it is uncommon. The atmosphere is ominous, but we've only just finished the introductory arcs. Much too early to throw in a curve-ball like this."

How he could be so fat and yet retain mobility, Dio had no idea.

"It is strange." Kirigiri said. She was standing right by the window and looked down. Not in dismay or anger, but pure calculation. "They stand out in heavy rain, chant the same slogans, and do the same thing every day, on the hour."

"Yeah man, it's super weird." Hagakure added, as if someone cared what he thought. He smiled like a drunken fool and raised a crystal ball. "Don't worry. I predict that this whole thing will pass over and everyone here is going to be as happy as our first days here by the next week."
Shut the hell up, Hagakure. Dio said to himself. Not out-loud, of course, lest he alienate his classmates.

To think that such a fool could have been accepted into Hope's Peak because he was correct 30% of the time. Dio had to work to get to this school, and Hagakure could simply slide on in. It disgusted him.

"That's optimistic of you. Assuming they'll break." Dio replied. He hid his loathing behind a neutral tone. "Hatred can make people do strange things. What is a little rain compared to the heat of your anger? What is a sore throat compared to funding murder? What is a slight chill when you're seen as a parasite for paying your way into this school." Dio faced Kirigiri who returned his stare. "They'll stand out there until they're broken or they get what they want."

"That's a bit dark, Dio," Makoto Naegi said, from the desk next to him, as Sayaka Maizono leaned towards him. The Ultimate Luckster looked concerned, almost as much as Fujisaki was. "If the administration stopped ignoring them. Calling them a Parade. Just leaving them there to fester. Maybe there'd be a chance to win them over."

Unless they've been commanded to stay out until ordered to charge in. Dio would allow them to simmer back down to a more manageable level later, to lower suspicions. A riot needed to happen first, though. To spread the chaos needed to execute his plan.

Until that very moment, he was sitting in a teacher-less room with the rest of his class. Dio had been pleasantly surprised by some, and unsurprisingly contemptful of others, in Class 78. He even found some of their company almost pleasant.

Fujisaki was hiding something, but her programming skills were useful for a project he had in mind. Oogami was stronger than him—a benefit of being able to train constantly since childhood while Dio was having to do shows, naturally—but had useful tips. In any true fight, he would obviously triumph, but he let the Orge have her moments. Kirigiri was especially good for conversations.

It was rare to find an intelligence much like his own. It could even be a threat to his plans. Celestia's Talent intrigued Dio. The Ultimate Gambler. Did it have something to do with Luck, or was it just making good use of what she had? Dio had to find out.

The problem was her hanger-on Yamada. He reminded Dio too much of Fatty added on with annoying traits. Since when was drawing porn a Talent? Not to mention Byakuya Togami. The only one worse was his own little fan in Touko Fukawa.

The less said about Hagakure, the better.

Yet there was one person who almost made it all worth it just by himself. Makoto Naegi; the Ultimate Luckster. The way he opened himself up to everyone, the way that he attracted everyone towards him, and the potential inside him. There wasn't a part of him that wasn't genuine in wishing the best for the others. It reminded Dio of Ryota.

His Luck Talent intrigued Dio as well.

Who are you, Makoto Naegi? Just an average person with random bouts of good and bad luck? Or something more. Dio might have thought about it further if he hadn't noticed the time on the clock. He needed to visit Ryota and see how he was doing, among other things. Ascension waits for no
He thought as he pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Dio, where are you going? It's dangerous out there." Maizono said, turning her head away from where she sat with Naegi.

"Yes! I cannot allow you to go out there when our teacher explicitly ordered us to stay in!" Ishimaru shouted, almost throwing himself off his chair and pointed his finger right at him. Did he really think he could stop Dio? "If you have a concern, surely it can wait until after-school?"

"It would be dangerous for you to go out alone without protection. For a skilled fighter as yourself, surely you know the dangers of being out-numbered." Oogami said cautiously.

"Maybe he's looking for a secret lover of his. Planning a vacation off in Europe while the rest of us fear for our lives." Fukawa muttered, which caught Celestia's eyes widen.

Dio raised his arms and turned to smile at his classmates. "Everyone, your concerns have been noted and accepted." He said, keeping his tone warm as the summer sun. "I, Dio, simply don't wish to sit in a classroom all day and just wait for the day to end. Our teacher isn't coming and thus we will learn nothing. Unless, Ishimaru, you want to take over as teacher?"

Ishimaru sputtered at the thought of usurping that kind of authority. That shut him up, and silenced the others. They were thinking the same thing as he was. Naegi was about to say something when Dio beat him to the punch.

"I'm just going back to my dorm room. The weather's only going to get worse, I didn't bring an umbrella so I'd rather my clothes weren't too soaked, and I can study fine in class. Attendance isn't even mandatory." Dio restrained a smirk at Ishimaru's red face, as he put a hand on Naegi's shoulder. "I'll be here same time tomorrow. Naegi, if you just let me go, I'll autograph whatever your sister wants from me."

Naegi's face blushed as the others laughed around him. It was a poorly-kept secret that Naegi's sister had been pestering him to get a signed poster of Dio Brando. That moment of distraction served as the perfect way for Dio to gracefully leave the room without being stopped.

The recent weeks had showed Dio why Hope's Peak had sustained itself for so long. The eccentric personalities were almost overbearing if it were not for the intensity of their Talents. They could even grow worthy of further attention. Some of them, at least.

But now wasn't the time for that. Dio needed to begin thinking about the next phase of his plan. Time wasn't on his side.

He had to start easing Ryota into the idea of increasing the intensity of the brainwashing techniques. Have his friend understand that Hope alone would not unite humanity. That it wasn't given that they would accept his gifts. The risk that they would reject him, once they discovered how he gave them Hope.

Their friendship and trust would help Dio.

*It'll be difficult, but nothing impossible for me. Not for the one who has the world's most powerful Stand. The one who tamed Izuru Kamukura. The one who will rule this world.* Dio had ascended beyond his title of Ultimate Male Model. He had ascended beyond Hope's Peak.
Hope and Despair were now more than quantifiable weapons for Dio to use at his leisure. He had ascended beyond the paradigm that ruled this world and had become something else. Something greater than Hope's Peak ever imagined to create.

Dio was the Ultimate Master. He who was greater than any other Ultimate, greater than any other human, and who would rule this world from his throne. The one who would smite the old world and destroy it utterly, so that he could usher in the new world.

All those who were in his way were now accounted for. He merely had to use Izuru to gather information about them, including a very deep secret about one of them, and Dio now knew his enemies. Who would get in his way.

Kazuo Tengan, Jin Kirigiri, Kyosuke Munakata. All three of them had weak-points. All three would be broken.

The war that was coming would be controlled by Dio. The sides of Hope and Despair would answer to Dio and fight a war without meaning. A battle whose conclusion had already been decided from the start. Once he would have his Ultimate Despair readied, his victory would be guaranteed.

Dio Brando laughed to himself. Why wouldn't he?

In a matter of weeks, his victory would be certain.

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"What are you doing here?" Mitarai asked. How did they even get here?

It had been an ordinary day—other than the heavy rain that even he could hear from underground—of Mitarai working on his anime until he heard the door slam open and three soaking-wet people burst through. He just barely recognised them from the photos that Sagishi showed him of their classmates.

There was Chiaki Nanami, the Ultimate Gamer, Peko Pekoyama, the Ultimate Swordswoman, and there was even Nagito Komaeda, the Ultimate Luckster. Sagishi didn't mention Komaeda often. He'd apparently been tied to the bombing controversy all those months back. It got the class teacher kicked to the Reserve Course and everything.

Why did they look so on-guard?

"Mitarai? You've lost weight." Nanami said. She must have known Sagishi as Mitarai and was confused at seeing the real thing.

"Is this where Tsumiki has been?" Peko asked, her hand hovering over the tsuka of her kendo blade.

What were they talking about? Tsumiki may not have been in class much these past few days (weeks?) but she sent a letter to Sagishi saying she was fine. She was helping Mitarai stay fit.

Okay, now she spent her time making out with Dio and talking all about him, but that was just dating, right? At least, that's what Mitarai saw in the movies.

He'd have thought she'd have told them about her new boyfriend. When she was doing whatever it
was she did when she wasn't helping out. It wasn't like she just sat there doing nothing. Maybe she didn't explain it to them and they were taking independent action.

Was it really that big a deal that she wasn't in class?

Mitarai was going to ask those exact questions when he heard footsteps coming from the secret passage into the room. It was either Dio or Tsumiki coming in. He sighed in relief. Things were going to calm down.

"Ryota, I need to talk to you." Dio's voice echoed into the room. Komaeda's smile darkened, for some reason, as the secret door opened and Dio walked into the room. "I've been thinking about our work. About how it is that we come to appreciate Ho-

He stopped himself when he saw the three new arrivals. He and the others stared at each other, Mitarai now ignored by both sides.

The atmosphere of the room changed. What was once awkward greetings had just turned ice-cold. Everything seemed darker now, as if a murder had just occurred and no one knew who had done the deed.

Pekoyama readied her sword as Dio regarded the three with a sharp eye.

"So you've arrived. How did you find this place?" He asked, without a trace of his usual warmth.

"I got lucky." Komaeda replied.

"I see." Dio smiled and took a step forward. Nanami and Pekoyama tensed as Mitarai only grew more confused. "No one can know of this."

"Your falcon didn't see us. Luck really is a great thing to have, when being used to help those with real Talent." Komaeda said, making Dio stop in his tracks.

"The Talent that allows you to bend probability to your whims. I, Dio, admire such a Talent." He chuckled. Mitarai didn't like this. Why was Dio being so weird? His question went unanswered as Dio eyed Komaeda intently. "When did you realise the truth?"

"I didn't think it'd be you. All I knew was that there was something pulling the strings." Komaeda kept on smiling as always, even when he put a hand inside his jacket. Even as he revealed the gun in his hand. "Getting a gun this far. I really was lucky. Dio, you're the reason that this school is in turmoil. That's why you'll die here. You know, I'll do anything for Hope. If it stains my hands, then that's more than fair."

Mitarai was frozen in his seat. Why did Komaeda have a gun? Why was he pointing it at Dio? Why wasn't Dio confused about these accusations as Mitarai was? His throat began to close up and he had to breath rapidly through his noise. Did Dio know something he didn't?

He should have used Virtual Insanity right then. Distract Komaeda, Pekoyama, and Nanami with an illusion of Dio and then ask what was going on. Was something happening at Hope's Peak? Why didn't Dio tell him? They were friends, so did Dio just not want to upset him?

But he didn't. Mitarai just sat there, scared for what would happen, while Dio just stood there.
Nothing about his stance changed. That constant pose that just emitted pure victory and confidence of self so much that it became like a planet itself. You couldn't help but be drawn to it.

That was when he started to laugh. Not the soft chuckles when he and Mitarai were alone, or the smug ones whenever he knew something or was making out with Tsumiki, but something else. Louder. More boisterous. Bordering on insane.

Dio took another step forward and threw his arms out; he dared Komaeda to take the shot, knowing he'd be safe.

"You think that your pathetic Hope can match up to the power of Dio?! You think that you can stand up to fate? Try it! See how you stand against the one who stands above Hope and Despair. Above Hope's Peak. The Ultimate Master himself!" Dio screamed. Mitarai had no idea what he was talking about.

Nanami looked just as confused as he was, already reaching to Komaeda. "A gun? Komaeda, wait! Killing is-"

"Necessary." Pekoyama said, no hesitation in her voice. She readied her kendo stick. "Stay back. Let us stain our hands against this man. He's the one behind all this, isn't he?"

Dio wasn't in danger. Holy Diver could easily catch the bullets from a machine gun, let alone a pistol, and crush them with its fingers, and easily break through steel, let alone a kendo stick.

That wasn't the point. Mitarai couldn't stand it. The confusion, the violence, and the mystery around it all. What was happening?!

He stood up from his chair. "Everyone, wait. We just need to-"

Komaeda didn't wait for him to say anything. He fired a shot from his pistol and the bullet flew towards Dio. Mitarai saw Holy Diver's left arm reach out and pluck it from the air, stopping the bullet dead in its tracks, as Dio made a soft hum of triumph. Komaeda and the others stared in shock at what must have looked like a bullet stopping in mid-air.

Pekoyama charged forward next, moving with such speed and finesse that Mitarai swore he could see after-images, and appeared at Dio's right. She swung her blade right at Dio's neck, intending to land a crunching blow. Against any human opponent, it'd be a great first blow.

Yet this was Dio, and he was no ordinary human, even without Holy Diver. The right arm manifested now and caught the kendo stick with one hand, its grip tightening until Mitarai swore he could hear metal bending, despite it being a kendo stick.

"Weak! Weak! Weak!" Holy Diver pushed back as the butt of blade slammed against Pekoyama's stomach.

Komaeda fired every bullet in his clip to try and help Pekoyama, but Holy Diver smacked each and every one, stopping their momentum and forcing them to fall on the ground. All apart from the first bullet in its fingers. It stared right at Komaeda and, before Mitarai could say anything, it flicked its fingers.

The bullet went flying back the way it came and struck Komaeda right where his heart should be.
Mitarai and Nanami both wailed in horror as Komaeda stumbled back two steps and fell to the ground. It was only the fact that Nanami pulled out the student handbook, which took the bullet for Komaeda, that kept Mitarai from trying to leave the room. This was too much!

He turned to Dio, who now looked at Komaeda as if he was a dog who did an impressive trick, and felt fright looking at him. It was the first time he felt it since they first met on that fateful night.

The blood had left his face long ago, his face almost turning blue from fear, as he began to feel woozy. "Dio! What are you-

"Nanami, Pekoyama, Komaeda! Run!" Mitarai heard a new voice and saw a woman in what looked like a housekeeper's uniform throw a fire extinguisher.

He wailed in fright and threw his arms up to defend himself; fear keeping him from doing the logical thing and getting out of the chair.

"Holy Diver!" Dio cried out, as Mitarai heard the Stand growl and slam its fist against the fire extinguisher. Mitarai opened his eyes to see a steamy mist pouring out from the wreckage that fell just a foot from his equipment.

The chaos gave time for Komaeda and Nanami to flee, but Pekoyama had been too close to Dio to do the same. Before Mitarai could even say anything, Holy Diver changed directions and slammed a fist right into the Ultimate Swordwoman's gut. Her mouth forced open as the wind was smashed out of her, before she collapsed unconscious.

Dio scoffed at her and kicked her to the side. Mitarai tried to say something, but couldn't find the words when he opened his mouth. He looked at the woman who threw it and realised who this was. The class teacher who Sagishi spoke so highly of while Mitarai did his work.

Chisa Yukizome.

Mitarai tried to ask, if not beg, Dio to explain what was going on and why all this was happening. Only he couldn't. Every time he tried to say something, the words got stuck in his mouth. The tension in the room was choking him. Preventing him from speaking out.

"I had planned on having those three watch the video. To make them understand their role." Dio said, looking down on Pekoyama and then to Yukizome, the latter glaring at him for what he just did to Pekoyama. He smiled in a way that definitely unsettled Mitarai. "But you'll do fine. Pekoyama will do as bait instead."

What was going on? Why was this happening?! Why was Dio acting like before? Back when he was trapped in Despair and before they met for the first time. He and Yukizome looked like they were getting ready to fight, and Mitarai had no idea why.

If this was what it was like down here, then what was it like up there? What were Class 77-B doing?

*They should know that Tsumiki's fine. She's going out with Dio! But why were they all shocked at seeing him? What did they mean by him being behind all this? What's the Ultimate Master? Dio, why are you staring at her like that? Like before? When we first met. What do you mean by bai-

This was too much. Mitarai needed to breathe. Nose, mouth, whatever got oxygen in. Only he wasn't breathing in air, but the mist that was coming out from the fire extinguisher and was now making him
cough. He hacked and coughed again and again until he felt like throwing up.

Yukizome looked at him with worry and even Dio turned to look at him. Mitarai needed to breathe. His head was feeling heavy and his vision changed from blurry to flashing with lights. He recognised what this was. He had it whenever he skipped too many meals or hours of sleep.

Mitarai didn't know if he was falling or not. The last thing he saw before darkness took over was Holy Diver turning to grab him, as the last thing he felt was Holy Diver's grip on his shirt.

He could always trust Dio to do the right thing. Maybe he was just being paranoid. This would all work out in the end, they'd all laugh about it, and go back to bringing a world of Hope. Mitarai was just being paranoid about all this. He could trust Dio. They both wanted the same things.

It was why they were friends, right?

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"Stop it! Please, stop it!" Chisa Yukizome screamed from the chair where she was restrained.

Yasuke Matsuda didn't know how to describe death. The last thing he remembered was being pummelled to death by two fists moving so quickly that they felt like two thousand punches at the same time. Then there was darkness. Then there was light.

It was obvious that Matsuda had two choices before him. One was to swear eternal allegiance to Lord Dio in the hopes of not dying, and the other was to disobey him and risk Holy Diver negating his very resurrection. To risk being killed again, this time slowly and painfully.

His mind whispered of the opportunities he had with Lord Dio's second chance. There was a place for him in the cosmic hierarchy, if he just followed orders.

So here he was. Lord Dio summoned him to handle things here while he went to rally the troops a little bit. To keep attention away from Class 77-B or any other student wandering about, such as Tsumiki assisting Peko's return to the class.

Mitarai's fainting spell had him moved to the bed and Yukizome's defiance earned her a special kind of punishment.

She had a strong will. Lord Dio's work was amateur, but it could definitely get the job done, with a trigger like the Student Council's murders. The brainwashing techniques should have kicked in, yet they didn't. Or rather they were but Yukizome was resisting too much.

Something had to be done.

*The riots should be starting. Lord Dio's rise will be unstoppable.* Matsuda reached over and readied the needles. This'd be easier with *She Blinded Me With Science*, if he still had access to it. *To turn a weapon of Hope into a battering-ram of Despair. Lord Dio's power in undeniable.*

Matsuda knew why he was brought back. You didn't become the Ultimate Neurologist, and become an essential pat of the Izuru Kamukura Project, without knowing how to manipulate the brain. Which parts held memories and which parts triggered emotions. A nihilist would say that all individuality
just comes from chemicals in the brain.

So if you took two needles and slid them through the top of the skull—much softer than most people thought it was supposed to be—and pierced the pleasure centers just right...

"Ah!" Yukizome's screams changed. They weren't cries of horror but now a gasp of pleasure.

It was basic Pavlovian tactics. Ring a bell when giving a dog food and soon they'd equate a bell's ringing with being fed. Associate Despair with unthinkable pleasure and you could turn even someone like Yukizome into a slobbering slave of Lord Dio.

It was just a matter of hitting the right point, using the right pressure, and pushing the needles in and out. In and out. In and out.

*The pleasure you're feeling. Greater than any high from a drug. Richer than any delicious food you devour. Better than any earthly pleasure.* Matsuda noted the way that her body language was shifting. Once she was shaking with all her might to escape, but now it was subdued, and her body showed very different signs. *Chisa Yukizome will be killed here. And in her place...*

Chisa moaned and breathed slowly. It was like those pervy magazines that Matsuda found on the desks of his adult co-workers so long ago. Doctor Shingetsu had sick tastes. The way that someone could become nothing more than a meat-puppet with the right abuse.

With a final guttural moan, Matsuda grimacing at the scent filling the room, Yukizome was finished. He looked down at her body and saw clothes sticky with sweat and a face with tears rushing down it, eyes filled with an infinite red-swirl, and the dumbest smile on her face.

Izuru Kamukura watched from the side of the room as his stare bored into Matsuda's back. At any moment, he could decide to avenge Hajime Hinata and kill Matsuda where he stood, but he wouldn't. There was no point to it, in his eyes.

If he dumped her on the bed next to Mitarai, you'd have thought she just had the time of her life with a student. But no. This was not what happened. Yasuke Matsuda just destroyed the woman who was once Chisa Yukizome.

In her place was now a loyal slave to Dio Brando and his divine purpose.

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"So this is the Ultimate Boxer? This is the man entrusted to guard Hope's Peak itself?" Dio Brando spat out the words like they were an undercooked meal. "Pathetic."

Juzo Sakakura tried to just lay down and regain his energy. He didn't even have it in him to move, even when surrounded by an army of Reserve Course students. Every last one of them looked ready to tear him to bits if given the order.

He first thought it was a stroke of luck finding Dio on that bridge. Munakata found out what no one else realised; that Dio Brando's history of violence matched perfectly with what they saw from the Student Council massacre. The fact that he got in without much else of a background-check implicated him further.
Sakakura thought it'd be easy to bring him in. All he had were some Reserve Course kids and himself. Nothing that Sakakura hadn't smashed to bits before. It's why he didn't think anything of Dio's challenge.

So what if he knew MMA, or a little bit of boxing? There were a lot of stuck-up, stick-up-their-asses who thought a little bit of training made them Muhammad Ali or Bruce Lee. The worst Sakakura feared was Dio's minions interfering.

He didn't think that Dio was that good at playing dirty.

Where the hell did he learn to fight? How did he learn to take those punches? Sakakura had connected punches that knocked out heavy-weight champions! With Dio, it was like they didn't even connect.

Meanwhile, Sakakura had barely saved his right eye from being gouged out by a last minute dodge. He still got knocked down, and couldn't get back up, after that blow. He could only look up at the cloudy sky and Dio's smug, dismissive face as the bastard stared down at him.

"You have only ever known the boxing ring. Your opponents were either rule-bound or mere children. Ogre Street would have eaten you alive like a newborn puppy." Dio scoffed, before he went back to a shit-eating grin. "I didn't even need to use your weakness."

Sakakura tensed up. Weakness? "What are you-"

"Did you think you were subtle? Maybe in public, but in the confines of your room when you thought no one was watching?" Dio asked. He put a hand into his pocket and threw a photo onto Sakakura's face, picture-first.

Moving his arm was like lifting dumbbells at the gym, back when he was just some punk, but it was the picture itself that made the weight of it all crash down on him.

It was him. He was in his room and he was sitting on his bed and he was looking at that picture of Munakata. The one that he took for his friend during Graduation Day and kept a copy when he had a shitty day. Just one look at that picture and he could fight on forever.

Now? Now it took everything out of him. His lungs felt constricted, panic made him breathe quicker even when he knew it'd fuck him in the long-run, and fear took over him. Someone took a picture of him when his defences were lowered. Someone knew his secret.

Dio-fucking-Brando knew that Sakakura was in love with his best friend.

"The friend who you watch and yearn for from afar, whose very presence makes your heart swoon and then break when you seem them with your other friend, and who makes you wish you never knew love, was never Chisa Yukizome," Dio paused to let the knives dig deeper. He was enjoying this. "But Kyosuke Munakata!"

The Reserve Course students began laughing. It was long, mocking, and made it clear that they didn't fear him anymore. What was Juzo Sakakura now but a joke to them? Just some loser who didn't have the guts to tell the truth, or accept it either.

Shut up. Just shut the hell up. Sakakura couldn't move. He couldn't get up and beat the crap out of
them until they'd stop laughing. All he could do was just lay there and take it.

It was his worst nightmare. His secret was out and everyone was just laughing at him. Letting all their spite pour over him. Sakakura was fine with it staying secret, especially back when he was in the boxing leagues, if he could just have his own moments.

Now Dio had those moments in his hand, and was smiling like a kid who got everything they wanted for Christmas.

"I wonder what he would say if he knew about this? That his best friend, the man he always trusted, was secretly yearning for him. The acts of one who wanted his body, rather than his companionship. That all those favours and acts were not of a brother in arms, but of a mangy dog looking for the slightest of treats."

Sakakura couldn't even look away from Dio. He had to stare into those red eyes and see all the joy and pleasure that came from having this secret revealed. Being able to torment him from up-high.

He knew what Munakata would say. The thought replayed in his mind a thousand times. There was the anger of thinking he'd ever leave Yukizome. The screams of Sakakura to get out, fearing that their memories together were just something for him to spank over. Hell, even being told to get the hell out of Hope's Peak Academy. Munakata might even try to beat the crap out of him.

No. That would just be in Munakata's mind. He was too kind to ever say something like that, let alone fight him.

It'd be worse than that.

"Sakakura," Munakata didn't look him in the eyes. He tried to show pity, but the disgust underneath was obvious. "It's best if we go our separate ways. Don't speak to me again."

Now Sakakura was crying like a little bitch. Dio was joining the rest of the Reserve Course in laughing at him now. This was all this fault. He didn't know why he was doing all this, but he never gave a damn and wasn't gonna start now.

"You piece of shit!" Sakakura threw out his arm upwards, towards Dio's face. It didn't even get close as Dio narrowed his eyes.

"Is that how you speak to the one who can destroy your friendship? Your reputation? Your life?" Dio's voice was low, venom dripping onto Sakakura's face. "Pitiful as you are, I have a use for you. It'd be difficult for me to launch my plans right now. I need time for Despair to fester in this place and across the world. Make no mistake, I could act today, but it'd be...inconvenient."

"What do you want?" Sakakura asked. He knew where this was going. Dio smiled and stayed quiet. "What do you fucking want?"

"For you to betray Kyosuke Munakata." Dio said. The hell did he just say? "You will tell him that you found that these Reserve Course students broke in. That they ambushed you and had you at their mercy until I came across you, coincidentally heading back to my dorm after realising that I was facing a pointless school day ahead, and saved you. You discovered that I had an alibi for all the incidents. That you owe your very life to Dio!"

Dio's voice went from calm and cruel to loud and victorious. He was demanding that Sakakura stab
his friend in the back with a story that made him look like a punk. The Ultimate Boxer; taken out by some kids and needing to be saved by another. Acting like Dio was a hero to everyone.

Lying to Munakata's face like that...

"S-Screw that." He managed to say. The fight took more out of him than he thought.

The look on Dio's face almost made it worth it. "You dare refuse Dio?!" Sakakura felt something hard kick on the side, his whole body turning to be face-down on the wet floor. Dio stomped on the back of his head hard, pressing his head firmly against the hard stone. "I'll make sure he finds out in the worst way possible. He'll find your battered corpse hanging from a tree with your dick out to a picture of him! Munakata'll know what you do in the dark of the night with those pictures. You will serve Dio whether dead or alive. Now decide!"

Sakakura either had to betray his friendship with Munakata or destroy it entirely. Become Dio's bitch or die; die being some creep who got hard over school photos, and then died like a bitch.

He knew what the only option was. But to have to say it, and to a guy like Dio Brando.

I'm sorry. I'm so goddamn sorry. Juzo Sakakura begged Munakata for forgiveness as he spoke into the ground. "I'll do it." He said, mumbling the words.

"Beg. Beg to serve your master." Dio said.

"P-P-Pl-" Sakakura breathed in and readied himself. "Please let you help you, Lord Dio!" He cried out, at the top of his voice.

There was more laughter around him. Dio's minions all looking down on the pathetic loser begging to help the guy crushing his skill right now. The humiliation made him want to just throw himself into the river and drown. Drown and disappear forever.

But he couldn't. He was lying on the ground, bloodied and defeated, and having to take shit from the guy who put in here. Who was killing all these people and now blackmailing him with his deepest secret.

Dio laughed. Why wouldn't he? He won.

"Good. I'll be back in a few hours and we'll go over the story." Dio lifted his boot and began to walk back to Hope's Peak. He turned his head back to Sakakura. "In the meantime, they'll be helping you with your cover-up. I may have been too soft in my blows."

The Reserve Course students snickered as they crowded around him. Was this punishment for what he did to that Reserve Course kid all those months ago? Or was this just because Dio was a sick son of a bitch? Probably both.

Sakakura shouldn't be crying like this. It only encouraged these kids as they lifted him up and readied their fists and legs. They wouldn't kill him. Just add to the bruises and cuts that were all over him. Maybe even break some bones.

How did Dio do it? How did he stay quiet enough to get those pictures of him? How did he command all these kids to obey him without question? Maybe they were just pissed off and followed whoever had the loudest voice.
Sakakura couldn't stop crying. The tears kept coming down. He had lost everything in a handful of minutes; thinking he'd take down this pretty-boy just fifteen minutes ago, and now he was here.

Dio made him look like a punk. Dio outed him and made him a joke to everyone around him. Dio made him betray Munakata. Dio was going to get away with it.

They didn't even need to break him. Dio already did that.

Sakakura let out a howl of utter Despair as the blows started to rain down.

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Chiaki Nanami was confused. Why had Miss Yukizome led her to this place?

They were in a large and dark room that was barely lit up apart from the very centre, just large enough for two people to stand about ten feet apart from one another, with walls that circled around with doors attached every forty-five degrees. Above the doors were where the walls moved closer to the centre of the room by about fifteen feet and formed a balcony for the upper levels.

It looked like where spectators would sit and watch a gladiatorial games, especially when there were television monitor resting where the edge of the balconies were, above where the doors were. Nanami had to fight to not be frozen on the spot in fear. To not panic.

The face on the monitors didn't make it easy. Nanami looked up in horror as she saw the face of the 'Ultimate Master' who was behind all this. The man who kidnapped Tsumiki, knocked out Pekoyama, and had almost captured Nanami and Komaeda until Miss Yukizome saved them.

His eyes were alight with bloodlust, perfectly suiting the mad grin on his face, and the joy in his voice when Nanami heard the door behind her lock.

"Chiaki Nanami. The great and shining Hope of Class 77-B. So long as you live, I shall be denied the use of those who will bring about The World's End." Dio said. He cackled and threw his arms out while the camera panned out. It was her classmates! They were trapped in another room, with monitors of their own showing Nanami and Miss Yukizome! "Which is stronger? Hope or Despair? Student or teacher? This is where we shall decide! If you want to save your classmates, then you must fight and win!"

"I won't fight her! We won't fall into Despair." Nanami screamed back. There was no way she'd do that to her beloved teacher.

"Then you will die!" Dio replied, the grin on his face only growing larger. "You wish to save your beloved classmates? Then prove it. Show me the drive of your friendship. Show me the love you hold for them. But you will have to make a sacrifice. You must be willing to even kill your teacher."

She would never do that. Nanami couldn't even bare the thought of killing Miss Yukizome, just as Miss Yukizome would never think of harming one of her students.

\textit{Miss Yukizome brought us together in the first place. She wouldn't agree to this. It'd just bring everyone Despair.} Nanami had faith in herself and Miss Yukizome. They'd never give in to Dio
Brando's plan.

She pointed a finger towards the monitor and spoke not only to Dio, but to her friends who seemed trapped where they stood. "You're wrong, Dio. We won't fight each other. We'll find a way out of this, we'll save the others, and we will-"

All of her attention had been on the television screen. All of it was focused on sending a message of defiance to Dio.

So she didn't notice when Dio's grin grew just a bit larger; when Miss Yukizome turned and rushed towards her.

When Miss Yukizome stabbed her in the gut.

Nanami could feel her eyes constrict, tears gather, and a gargled wail burst out from her throat as she collapsed onto the ground. It hurt. It hurt!

The knife was wrenched out of her body as she fell, causing it to dig deeper into her body for a moment before it left, and Miss Yukizome drew it back. Her expression was divided between the smile on her face and the tears rushing down swirling eyes.

"Did you not listen to me? Did it not occur to you what her leading you here meant? Or did all those video games rot your mind?" Dio asked, speaking as if Nanami was a stupid child. "The teacher you knew has submitted to I, Dio. I own her. Mind, body, and soul. She's nothing more than a bitch for me to command. Isn't that right, Woman?"

"Lord Dio's power is amazing, Nanami..." Miss Yukizome's voice was unsteady as took a step towards Nanami, making her whimper in fright. What was she going to do to her with that bloody knife? "The thing he's capable of...it's just unreal. So please, Nanami, for me,

She didn't stab Nanami again, but instead slammed her right foot against where she had stabbed her. Nanami couldn't stop herself from howling in pain again as Miss Yukizome knelt down and straddled her, the knees pressing down on her shoulders. She couldn't look away as Miss Yukizome put her knife to the side and placed a hand on her cheek.

Her smile looked like it always did. Warm and full of love.

"Die." She said, with eyes filled with Despair, as the hand on Nanami's cheek moved up to her hair.

There was no way she could win. Miss Yukizome was stronger, faster, and was actually willing to fight even as the monitors filled with the screams of Class 77-B. All of them begging her to stop and realise what she was doing. To come back to her senses.

What actually happened was that Nanami felt her hair pulled out by its roots. Her face battered and pummelled by fists despite her best efforts to protect it. She managed to throw Miss Yukizome off her and roll to the side, but that just opened her up to kicks to the side.

It was a one-sided beating. Nanami felt bruises grow all over her body as Miss Yukizome punched, kicked, slapped, and even clawed her body. The knife was only ever used to make thin but painful slices all over her body. All to add that little bit more pain when she hit those same cuts.

She wouldn't need a mirror to know that she looked nothing like she normal self. Her face felt like
there was barely any part of it that wasn't swelling or bruised. Miss Yukizome had broken at least two of her fingers on each hands (it was fine, she could play games with her class later), and one of the cuts on her stomach had been deeper than expected. She wasn't sure that much blood was supposed to come out of her.

Nanami couldn't stop herself from crying. It hurt too much. She just wanted the pain to stop. She wanted this day to have never happened and they could do back to their happy lives again.

Dio found her suffering hilarious.

"What's this? What happened to your iron resolve? Hope is easy when you live in an undisturbed harmony. When there is no sacrifice needed." Dio said. Nanami barely heard him over her screams as Miss Yukizome dug her nails and dragged them down her back. "You think that you will escape this alive? You think your classmates won't fall into a pitiful and ugly state of Despair? It's useless, useless, useless!"

\textit{It's not useless! We won't give in.} Nanami told herself. Miss Yukizome's fist landed on the side of her jaw and she felt one of her molars breaks off. \textit{I have to reach them. Miss Yukizome isn't being herself! This isn't the end!}

It was the only thing that kept her going through the assault. All despite how Miss Yukizome wouldn't stop finding ways of hurting her. If it weren't for the tears dripping on her skin and clothes, she might have thought there was no trace of her teacher left.

She whimpered not just because of the injuries. The cries of her friends was carried through the monitors and reminded Nanami of what she had to do. She had to find a way out of this! She had to save them!

But what could she do?

Nanami wondered if this was how she was going to die, before Miss Yukizome suddenly stood up. Blood dripped from her knuckles as she turned away from Nanami. She walked away towards one of the doors. Dio had raised a hand which apparently called her off. It was the only reason she was still alive.

It was near-impossible to find the strength to stand up again. The hope that her classmates hadn't fallen into despair yet was all that kept her going. She felt blood ooze down her face and body and create a puddle on the floor. Taking each step towards the door ahead made her wince in pain.

There were more monitors with Dio's face on them. All of them repeating the same message as she forced herself to move forward slowly, very slowly, but surely ahead. She had to save her classmates. She had to keep them from despair.

"Do you now see the pointlessness of your Hope? Do you understand the power of I, Dio?" He asked. The screen zoomed in and emphasised his face alone. The maniacal look of a bully given unlimited power. "Embrace Despair! Embrace submission to Dio! Because this power I am about to show you is more terrifying than any other! The power to erase the existence of another entirely! Chiaki Nanami! You walk to your utter destruction."

He was lying. He was just trying to make her hurt more. Trying to make her despair. She kept on walking down the hallways and towards the place where she would find her classmates. No matter how long it took, how much it hurt, and how much blood she lost, she had to keep moving.
I have to make it. I have to save them.

She was so focused in her manta that it almost dulled the pain. It gave her the strength to keep moving forward to where her friends were.

Nanami almost didn't notice the figure behind her. With hair that almost fell to his feet and eyes red as blood.

Izuru Kamukura slowly followed Chiaki Nanami's march to her fate.

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"So you saw it." Dio didn't even look at Mitarai. "This was inevitable."

"Shut up! Just shut up!" Mitarai screamed, holding up his phone as if it was a weapon. A weapon that not even Holy Diver could stop. "You lied to me. You said we were going to make the world a better place. Give everyone Hope. Create Heaven."

*Listen to yourself. Listen to how stupid you sound!* Mitarai was such an idiot! Dio offers a couple of kind words and gestures and Mitarai became the perfect puppet. All these years he spent thinking that he actually saved someone.

Now here he was, confronting Dio in the room he kept Mitarai in while he caused carnage above, getting ready to stop Dio, even if it killed him. He had to. There was no one left. If he hadn't woken up to see Matsuda watching Nanami's murder, he'd have been tricked again by Dio. If he hadn't watched that video of Dio slaughtering the Student Council...

Mitarai didn't stop himself from crying. He had no right to, after everything he did, but he still wept regardless. He wept for all of Dio's victims and he wept for the part he played in all this. Giving Dio the tools needed to destroy the world.

It was his fault that Nanami was dead. It was his fault that Yukizome was lobotomised into Despair. It was his fault that all of this was happening.

All because of his stupid anime.

"I never lied to you, Ryota. I did not think I'd have to move this quickly. In an ideal world, you'd have known about this before things accelerated." Dio raised his head to look at the ceiling, his back still to Mitarai, and sighed. "Or perhaps this always had to happen. The final test that fate has given me."

"Shut up about fate! This is all you! You killed the Student Council, you created that, that, *thing* from my techniques, and you murdered Nanami! For what? To rule the world?" Mitarai tried to sound angry, but all it did was choke his voice further. The sting of betrayal was too much. "How many people have you killed? When did this start?"

"Dozens. If things go to plan, more will die. I started with my father." Dio replied. Mitarai gasped in shock at that last point-even if it made sense now-which seemed to make Dio go on. "The bastard who sold my mother's beloved dress to pay for booze. Do you want to know how he died? I
poisoned him. Slipping it in with his booze and then into his medicine. He died in his own filth."

The way Dio spoke scared him. All that hatred and viciousness in his voice poured out and filled the room. The way he could so easily describe the death of his father, even if he did deserve it, wasn't supposed to come out of a human's mouth.

He could recognise it, though. He saw it in the way that he had Holy Diver tear through the Student Council as if they were nothing and how he spoke when dealing with Nanami. It was the voice he heard when he first met Dio, being threatened with his fingers if he failed a test he was never meant to pass.

Mitarai thought Dio had changed. He was such an idiot. All he did was show Dio a weapon and think all those tricks really meant something. As if the moments they shared, and the secrets confessed, really meant anything to Dio.

There was a tiny-weak and cowardly-part of him that wanted to still have faith in Dio. Still deluding itself into thinking that Mitarai was any more than a loser whose stupidity cost lives. Acting like he should even hesitate about this.

"We said we'd never betray one another. We said we were each other's first friend. The voice said, which only made Mitarai angrier. Shut up! Dio betrayed us. He lied all this time to use our techniques for Despair! He brainwashed Sagishi! Dio. Is. Evil!

An evil that Mitarai had enabled and strengthened all these years.

Not anymore. He created this monster and he'd kill it too.

"Dio, I won't let you bring the world into Despair. I won't let you kill anymore people!" Mitarai's scream hurt his throat. Maybe that was why he spoke in a whisper. "It's not a betrayal. You betrayed me first."

"Is that what you think? Yes, perhaps you believe that I, Dio, have lied to you. That this is all for Despair." Dio's voice then changed. It stopped being so firm and violent, and instead grew softer.

"It's not. This is all for Hope. Real Hope."

"What?" Mitarai couldn't stop himself from being caught off-guard. Dio said that with such sincerity; using the voice Mitarai was used to hearing from him.

The voice of his friend.

"We're Hope. The two of us. You, Ryota, are its warmth and kindness. The desire to make things better and to help everyone. But you're fragile. Despair would devour you alive." Dio motioned to himself. "I am the part of Hope that evolves and fights. The will to fight and to live on. To overcome the obstacles in my way.

"That's the problem with this world. It's weak. It's fragile. Reliant on a decaying order all around us. Would you like to know what the Hope Cultivation Plan is? The utter annihilation of an individual's humanity to fill them with Talent, a broken Stand, and make it their puppet." Dio's voice then turned cold. "Did you really think your anime alone would bring about Heaven? That it would make everyone happy?"

"No. Nononono. Shut up!" Mitarai would have thrown his hands up to cover his ears if they weren't
holding the phone ready. "Turn around and let's end this!"

"People would have noticed. Many would have been captivated, but there's also a few who would have found out how it worked. The techniques you used." Dio took a step backwards, moving closer to Mitarai, as he kept talking. "People search for reasons to reject true happiness. They do not wish for certainty if it costs them safe mediocrity. They need to know Despair to truly want Hope."

Mitarai didn't want to imagine it. He didn't want to picture what Dio was saying. It'd have been better if his anime didn't reach anyone at all.

But he could see it. People who were initially reached and saved by it would discover the brainwashing techniques behind it. They'd react with horror and disgust at what Mitarai did and reject his anime and work entirely.

He imagined a sea of faces, each one looking at him with hatred and loathing. Some looked like Rohan Kishibe, others looked like his parents, and there were always the faces of the children who'd toss him into the pile of trashbags, throw garbage over him, and laughed as they took pictures.

The entire world spitting on his hard work and casting him out. Unable to do what he loved and hated by all around him. Eternal loneliness and rejection with no one by his side. No one to help him survive.

It was the worst kind of Despair.

*No! He's lying. Lying to make you hesitate.* A part of his mind said. The one that knew that Holy Diver could emerge at any second and try to crush his wrist. To get the phone away from him so that Dio could kill him.

So why wasn't Dio trying just that?

"In truth, I'm glad this moment has come," Dio's voice dropped. It became so quiet that Mitarai had to strain to hear him. "I have raised defences around my heart to never feel unsafe. To always feel secure. Yet you, you have managed to bring them down. You are the first friend that I have ever made. You make me feel calm, Ryota. You make me feel safe."

Dio was always faster than Mitarai, even when he was far larger than him.

Mitarai only saw the outline of Dio turning around before he felt his arm get grabbed. He let out a squeal, thinking that he would lose his arm, but realised that Dio had only grabbed his wrist. Dio wasn't even trying to attack him, or throw away his phone. It was the opposite.

Dio was holding onto Mitarai's wrist and holding the phone just in front of him so that he'd see the whole screen. Mitarai's thumb was trapped under Dio's and made to just hover over the button to play the brainwashing programme. The programme meant to keep Dio under control.

It'd be so simple. Have Dio watch it and then he could stop all this by...by...fine, Mitarai hadn't gotten to that part yet, but what mattered was stopping Dio, right? He had to be stopped! He was Despair. He must be! He must have lied to Mitarai all this time!

So why was Mitarai fighting to *not* press the button and end all this?

"You could press that button and this will all be over. No one else knows what I am capable of. No
one else knows my plans and secrets like you do." Dio stared into Mitarai's eyes. "Holy Diver is the most powerful Stand in the world, but it has one great weakness. It can only negate effect that I, Dio, want it to. With the power of your Talent, you could hijack my mind and make me hold Holy Diver back. You could make me turn myself in. You could even make me kill myself.

"All the power in the world could be yours. Virtual Insanity and your Talent together create a dangerous threat. The fact that I trust and love you so is a threat. I need to know if I was right to trust you." Dio tightened his grip on Mitarai's wrist, but not too tight. As if he didn't want to make Mitarai drop the phone. "This is the choice before you. You can save this world, be heralded as the Ultimate Hope, and pray that no one ever discovers the secret of your anime. Maybe you'll be free. All you need to do is betray me."

This was it. This was his chance to save the world. To stop Dio Brando. To do what no one else could, thanks to Dio's Holy Diver, and end this before it began.

So why am I hesitating? Why can't I just press the button? Mitarai felt the tears come back to him. He knew exactly why he was being so weak. Why he wasn't pushing the button already.

Because this was his friend.

Mitarai could deny it all he liked, but the Dio before him was the same Dio who wanted to be his friend. The one who killed Nanami and turned Class 77-B to Despair was the same Dio who praised Mitarai's anime, who wanted to know what made him him, and who comforted him in his lowest moments. When Rohan Kishibe told him he was trash. Whenever Mitarai felt the pressures of work. Whenever he feared Dio would abandon him. He was there.

There had been no manipulation other than to learn the techniques. Dio sincerely believed that Mitarai would have been convinced if he had the time. He believed that they were friends this whole time. He meant it when he said he cared about Mitarai, that he was the only one he felt calm around, and that they were going to reach Heaven together.

But the things he did! People died by his hand, it may have even been how he got those Arrows, and he was going to bring Despair to the world. He was going to bring it to the brink just so he could save it.

Was Mitarai supposed to just let this happen?

If he threw away his phone now, that would be it. There would be no turning back. He and Dio would be bound together on this path. He'd be saying it was okay for Dio to have killed the Student Council. That Nanami's death was necessary. That Class 77-B becoming Ultimate Despair was a price worth paying. For what? Heaven.

Yes. Heaven. A place where everyone would live in Hope. No one would be in Despair and everyone would be saved. There would be no uncertainty, fear, or anger. Just people being able to accomplish the fate before them.

A place where all sins could be erased.

Ryota Mitarai had two choices. The first was to use the brainwashing on Dio and have him stop all this. He would save this world and maybe bring Hope by his anime, after all this. All it risked was failure and the world remaining stuck between Hope and Despair, while Mitarai lived a lonely life rejected by all. The second was to stand by his friend and let the old world burn. To put his faith in
Dio absolutely and unconditionally.

What was more important? Dio or the world?

The thumb over Mitarai's pushed down even harder, the tip of his fingerprint touching the button to open the brainwashing programme. "Do it!" Dio screamed.

"No!" Mitarai used all his force to wrench his hand free from Dio's own. The phone was thrown across the room and onto the bed screen-down.

He had made his choice. He had chosen his friendship with Dio Brando over everything else.

Mitarai collapsed onto his knees and threw his hands over his eyes. He was crying. "I can't...you're my friend...and I'm crying over it...can't even commit to a choice...I'm so pathetic."

"You're not," He could feel Dio's arms wrap around him, his lips so close to his ear that the gentlest whisper could be heard. "I, Dio, despise pathetic things and I do not despise you. I love you. Ryota, all I need is for you to stand by my side. Finish your anime. My programme only works so far. I need your anime to truly accomplish my mission. Only the two of us together can accomplish our dream."

"To reach Heaven." Mitarai said, as if it were a prayer.

"To understand Heaven, you need to see Hell." Dio pulled him in closer, putting a hand by his stomach and another by his lower jaw, softly stroking the skin. "And we'll reach Heaven together. Because our fates are bound as one."

Dio used his grip on Mitarai's lower jaw to turn his head around slightly. Mitarai barely saw a glimpse of Dio's own face before he felt lips touch his own.

Dio was kissing him.

Mitarai was confused, but he had been confused for so long that it felt like the new normal. It wasn't that he hated it. He never had feelings for another man before, but he didn't have such feelings about a woman either. So much time had been spent hiding away from others that maybe he didn't even know his own heart.

He didn't hate it. He didn't even dislike it. So Mitarai accepted the kiss.

He's all I have left. He's all I can believe in. Mitarai turned to fully face Dio and hold onto him as they kept on kissing. He needed something to hold on to and Dio was his lifeline. So I have to stand by him. I have to help him reach Heaven. Or it will all be for nothing. Everyone's deaths...their sacrifices, will become meaningless.

The time they spent kissing and holding one another was short. Dio growled against Mitarai's mouth and slipped his tongue in, as the hand that was on his chest began to undo shirt-buttons. Dio stood up and Mitarai was lifted off the ground with him, as Dio rushed towards the bed.

The phone was put to the side and Mitarai dropped down to where it was. His head landed on the pillow and his body sprawled out to make it easier for Dio to take off the rest of his clothes. When that was done, Dio started taking off his own clothes.

Mitarai was feeble and starved, nothing like the physical perfection of Dio's body, the kind of body
that only the Ultimate Male Model could have. Just looking at his shirtless body compared to his own made Mitarai ashamed.

But Dio didn't see it like that. He whispered of how beautiful Mitarai was and that Dio was so lucky to have found him on that day.

That was how they spoke while doing it. Mitarai and Dio were each other's first friend, so why not also be the other's first time as well? Dio spoke to Mitarai in harsh whispers about the world they'd make, whilst Mitarai begged to know of how there would be no more Despair. A world where everyone would be happy together.

Dio agreed on that. It would be a world where no one would be afraid or uncertain about themselves. They would have peace of mind under Dio's rule.

They would have Hope.

Their first time lasted thirty minutes, most of it being talking and undressing. It still hurt. Mitarai cried into Dio's shoulder when they started as his friend whispered that it was okay. That the pain would stop soon. It took longer than he thought, but Dio was right in the end. Pain became pleasure and Mitarai tightened his grip on Dio, not wanting to let him go.

It signified a new chapter in Mitarai's life. He was no longer just the Ultimate Animator who hid away from his classmates to work on his anime. He was now the second-in-command to the Ultimate Master; the one who would bring Hope to a world drowning in Despair in Dio's name.

As Dio had the Reserve Course calm themselves down and bide their time, Mitarai left Hope's Peak as soon as he could. He had a place to eat, rest, and work waiting for him and it was perfect for working on his anime. There was even time to experiment with Virtual Insanity.

There were still visits; just like Dio and Mitarai's friendship before all this. They were mostly the same, discussing their days and talking about the future, but there were changes now. Dio stayed the night most times and they inevitably found themselves in the same bed again.

Mitarai wondered if that was Dio's way of handling any guilt Mitarai might have felt about Ultimate Despair. His friends, classmates, and teacher all turned into extensions of Dio's will. When they were 'together', Dio whispered to Mitarai of how the sins they would commit for him wouldn't matter when they reached Heaven.

Just as sins committed to them would be wiped away, so would the sins they'd commit.

*It'll be made right. When we reach Heaven, we'll erase all sins. Everyone will only know Hope.* Mitarai repeated that mantra whenever he could. Not always in those exact words, but still whenever he could. In bed with Dio, working on his anime, waking up from nightmares, just about every day.

Dio and Mitarai were in this together now. Mitarai had betrayed one friend, he wouldn't betray another. Dio needed him to complete his anime and that was what he would do. He kept to regular meal and sleep schedules, less loyal to the latter still, so to not disappoint Dio.

It would all be worth it, when Dio reached Heaven. It wasn't just a state of mind. It was the ultimate level for Dio's Stand. The way for Holy Diver to reach its full potential; to be able to decide the fate of everything and to wash away the sins of the past.
And Mitarai would do everything necessary to help Dio discover the way to reach it.

Let The World's End flood all of Earth and let humanity find the Ultimate Despair. Their suffering would be rewarded in the end. Hope would come to everyone and everything. That's what Mitarai told himself as he worked on the anime day in and day out, whenever Dio wasn't around.

When the Eyes of Heaven opened, mankind would find the Ultimate Hope.

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The old world was dead.

Hope's Peak was nothing more than a pile of rubble, the world was plunged into eternal war, and the Reserve Course students must have announced themselves as followers of Dio by now. Those who wished to preserve their world were now caught in a battle they couldn't win.

The Stands of Ultimate Despair, given by Dio himself and trained over the course of several months, were more than enough to defeat their enemies. It didn't even matter. His enemies were no more than puppets on a string for him to command.

The beacons of hope that the Headmaster invited into the old building, sealed and protected for their own safety, were meant to weather the storm inside. They were completely isolated from the outside world.

Ultimate Despair have their Stands. They may be nothing to Holy Diver, but they will be more than enough to destroy the world outside. Dio could rely on them to at least cause some destruction. He could do the rest from inside the building itself. Jin Kirigiri. Your naivety in granting me entrance will be your undoing!

Dio could easily take over from within. Holy Diver would be more than enough to subdue the others and he could simply bring back Matsuda to handle the memory erasure-having killed him a second time to make it easier to get him in-and then the plan could begin. The destruction of all Hope that Dio did not command.

All he needed to do was wait for Ultimate Despair to be positioned across the world to publicise his broadcast.

The Murralsee were programmed and ready below, gifts gratefully accepted from the Towa Group, and Dio already had the perfect plan to fuel the cybernetic suits. Kazuichi was especially involved in enabling them to become suits of armour themselves.

As for the outside world, Dio had his Warriors of Hope on standby in Towa City, Ultimate Despair as his dogs of war, and Ryota himself was safe and sound.

Pet Shop had been sent with him to ensure his safety on the road. The problem with Despair was that it required focus Dio couldn't afford to give. Virtual Insanity required closed spaces, a key weakness during an apocalypse, so it fell to Pet Shop. He'd keep Ryota safe.

Ryota had been a fine friend through all of this. Dio knew that he won his total and undying loyalty on that day. Whatever he asked of him, Ryota would do without question. All that had truly changed
was how they expressed their bond and relationship.

They had only grown closer after that day. Ultimate Despair were good for a fuck every now and then, but Dio made love with Ryota. They would stay in bed and continue friendly conversations, promising to stand by the other.

Dio remembered his parting words to Ryota as if they were yesterday.

"This is not our final meeting," He promised, Ryota holding him tightly from the side. "When my classmates are knocked out and Jin is executed, just before the Mutual Killing Game, I'll televeise it. Meet me by the entrance of the old building and we will have one more talk before I seal the Academy again."

"I trust you, Dio. I know we'll be together after all of this." Ryota replied. He moved closer to Dio. "It'll be amazing. The world we'll create together."

"Just as you saved me, we'll save this world. What are the sins of the past compared to the glory of the future? When I reach Heaven, you will stand by my side, Ryota, and help me create this world of Hope. The world ruled by Dio."

Ryota left to be 'found' by the Future Foundation that very day. The woman should have done her job and they'd be aware of Ryota's existence. He'd claim to offer help and then they'd let him in.

He could trust Ryota to lead his minions within the Future Foundation. When the Mutual Killing Game ended with Dio's victory, they would open the gates for Dio's armies and welcome him to do with the organisation. Kill them. Spare them. Whatever he chose.

It'd be so easy for Dio to simply use Ryota's techniques to convert his classmates. To turn them into his servants and broadcast it to the world. Let everyone know that their last hopes were his servants.

But he didn't.

Dio had grown cautious of the brainwashing techniques. It was not that they were ineffective. Far from it; they were extremely effective. Yet they were almost too effective. It was like Dio was simply riding on the coattails of Ryota's own work rather than reaching Heaven alone.

He would never let Ryota know about it, but Dio had been growing uneasy about how he had reached this point. It was because of Dio's own natural abilities and his Stand that he reached this level, right? He hadn't simply coasted on Ryota's Talent like some kind of leech. Of course not! It was simply the doubt that all humans felt.

A doubt he would overcome with this coronation. The perfect opportunity to reveal his power, even without Holy Diver.

He remembered a conversation he had with Ryota about Stands. Their powers, their potential to grow, and even whether there was a level beyond them. If that was what Dio's visions were about. A way to make Holy Diver even more powerful than it was now.

Was the way still unknown because Dio had stopped growing?

What if these visions remain mysterious because I have grown lazy? I have grown reliant on Ryota's work for too long. Dio realised what had to be done. He had to break his classmates with his own
two hands. The Mutual Killing Game would have to be enough.

He was isolated from his allies. All he had were the few treasures from his vaults—consisting of the world's artworks, books, and other priceless artefacts that would soon decorate his castles—that he had hidden in the basement of Hope's Peak. In time, they would be the Presents of the Murralsee Machine. A way to form bonds that would be shattered by Despair.

All but one. The one treasure that Dio kept on his person at all times and would only add when the Killing Game was about to begin. When he would need it in case of an emergency, or if one of his classmates ended up a loyal servant and would need a reward.

The Stand Arrow.

He wouldn't need it. His classmates would be gripped by panic and claustrophobia, unable to trust one another, as the murders continued and their spirits broke. It would only be a few rounds before they'd beg Murralsee for mercy and kneel before the Mastermind.

They would kneel before Dio in front of the entire world.

Dio would strike then. The very sight of their submission would shatter humanity's last shreds of hope and leave them open to Despair. Dio would crush the Future Foundation and force Towa City under his rule. All would be desperate to find a release. To find some kind of reason to live on.

That would be when the anime would turn on. Ryota still didn't have a name for it; but that didn't matter. Not when its impact would cover the entire world as the Mutual Killing Game would.

Like a traveller in the desert to the sight of an oasis, they would latch onto that Hope and gladly submit to it. They would see the truth of Heaven and learn to love Dio as their Ultimate Master along with fearing him. They would do anything for him.

Millions of minds all working together to build a kingdom in Dio's name. To root out any resistance and force them into line. To work to help the evolution of Holy Diver and to interpret Dio's visions.

*And then I, Dio, will reach Heaven and become the eternal master of mankind.* Dio smiled to himself as he pictured it. The raw power flowing through him and the mastery he would hold over Fate. *Prepare yourself, humanity! I, Dio, will rule over your futures just as I do your present!*

All that he needed to do was wait for the right moment to strike.

"Dio? Are you there? We need your help." Naegi's voice echoed through into the hallway where Dio went to gather his thoughts. He turned to see Naegi just by the corner, pointing and calling back to someone. "I found him, Maizono."

Maizono turned the corner and glared at Dio. "Oh good. Kirigiri was getting worried. It's bad enough that Yasuhiro's not doing her fair share. Now you?"

"Sorry, I got caught up in everything. I just needed a moment alone. I was thinking of, well, everyone outside. The people who couldn't hide in a fortress." Dio said. He adopted the tone of a man caught in a rare moment of indecision.

"It's the same for all of us, Dio. Family, friends, pets, we've all got something to fear." Naegi said, looking uneasy himself, likely thinking of his own family. Yet he straightened himself out and
looked Dio right in the eye. "But don't lose hope. This won't last forever; people can't keep fighting and killing forever. The world's going to be back to normal before we know it. It's just a matter of waiting."

*People will fight and kill forever if I wish it so.* Dio thought to himself. But he had to admit, he did admire the flicker of flame in Naegi's words. It was impressive how he could speak with such determination.

It was like watching Ryota's anime all over again. That rush of Hope and belief in the certainty of another. Yet, instead of the work of techniques designed to manipulate memory, this was the words of a single person. It was impressive.

Too impressive.

Naegi was more than an optimistic soul, but the wielder of the most dangerous Talent. The Talent of Luck. Probability changed around him. Random bursts of good and bad luck that could disrupt Dio's plan. Throw it all array.

He could kill him. Now, or later, he could just kill Naegi and end it. Luring him would be easy by simply appealing to their friendship for a moment alone, or when Dio had knocked them all out for the Killing Game.

Dio thought about it, as he smiled and walked behind Naegi and Maizono, before scoffing at the thought.

*Please. As if Makoto Naegi will foil my plans. My classmates are bright but specialised. Most know little of combat.* The main threats were Oogami, Fujisaki, and Kirigiri, all of their Talent representing threats to his control, and he wouldn't kill them. So why target the wild-card on paranoia alone? *Even if they do discover me. It doesn't matter. Holy Diver has destroyed all chance of defeat.*

Dio Brando, the Ultimate Master, would soon become the true ruler of mankind and the Earth from now to forever.

It was just a matter of time.

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Kazuo Tengan looked upon the last hope for the world they once knew.

All of them sat by a circular table which held those who were chosen to fight until the end against the forces of Dio Brando's Ultimate Despair. The remaining beacons of hope for the world itself. Especially now that Jin and Class 78 had gone dark.

*Poor bastard. He sealed himself in with his own killer.* Tengan pitied the man. He didn't ask to be the Headmaster who saw his world destroyed. His life was tragic enough. A man exiled from his own family, lost his wife to a cruel disease, and then alienated his own daughter.

Maybe death would be merciful in contrast.

As for the Future Foundation, the few remaining parts of Hope's Peak Academy, from graduates to
expelled students to even students, they were stuck with the living.

They were stuck with having to fight against at least fifteen Stand users. One of those being Izuru Kamukura himself.

It was a miracle that they survived the first few battles. Munakata had insisted on open warfare - a response from the heart after seeing so many atrocities in such little time - and most supported him. Tengan was finding that most of those chosen looked more to Kyosuke than himself. Oh, there was Mitarai, Gozu, Bandai, Kizakura, and even Gekkogahara, as a strong back-bone of support. Only the others either looked to Ruruka (herself and Sonosuke) or Munakata for true leadership.

Defeat, even with, or because of, such high casualties, changed nothing. Tengan obviously knew something and he was to explain himself.

"There is a reason why Ultimate Despair have proven impossible to defeat in the field. I'm afraid this was because of a failure on the part of people like myself." Tengan said, barely able to meet their eyes. "We put too much faith in artificially creating Hope instead of trusting in people."

"Get to the point." Sakakura snapped, glaring. A quick glance by Munakata made the 6th Division Head cut down the aggressive body language. No need to alienate people just yet.

Tengan saw only troublesome times ahead for the Future Foundation, not least because of what he was about to say.

"It all began when an archaeological team in Egypt discovered a number of arrows at a dig-site," Tengan pressed a button ahead of him, seated at the head of the table, and a picture of the Stand Arrows appeared from a television screen behind him.

The next half an hour of explaining himself gained a furious reaction. He was accused of lying, incompetence, maliciousness, and setting them up to die for a doomed cause. Ruruka was glared down by Munakata at that last one. Tengan saw trouble in the future there, especially with Sonosuke sitting by her side, glaring back.

This was the final hope for mankind? Ruruka and Sonosuke were now bickering with Kimura over grudges back at Hope's Peak, Gozu and Sakakura were roaring about the legitimacy of Tengan's authority, Kizakura and Munakata traded veiled jabs at potential fault and ambition respectively, and there was no peace despite Bandai and Gekkogahara's efforts.

Tengan looked at the only two people who didn't join in. Chisa Yukizome and Ryota Mitarai. The only two who were on the same wavelength as Tengan. The only two who shared his thoughts.

_This is Lord Dio's opposition? These fools?_ Tengan smiled to himself as everyone became lost in their own world. Unable to see the truth in front of them. Fate truly had blessed him. The Despair of seeing the bright stars of the future go out one by one. Destroyed by the supernova of Lord Dio himself.

The complete and utter destruction of mankind's evolution. Its future controlled by one man and one man alone. To think that the legacy of Hope's Peak would be nothing more than the origin point for The World's End. Nothing more than the ladder from which Dio would rise to the top.
Yukizome had showed Tengan Mitarai's work and now he saw the truth. How pointless it was to fight against Dio. But those were his orders, until Mitarai commanded otherwise. Fight and show how weak Dio's enemies truly were.

*I wonder what Heaven will look like?* Tengan asked himself. He looked at Mitarai and gave a soft smile at the boy, who looked away. Was that guilt? Disgust? Or just paranoia?

What did it matter, if someone saw a look between the Chairman and a Branch Head? It wouldn't make a difference.

This was Dio's world now.

**Chiaki Nanami: Erased**
"You... can't accept the agreement?" Naegi muttered out in shock while the President of the United States sat behind his desk.

"Not as the Future Foundation has made it, no." President Funny Valentine was a rather tall man. Physically fit, which showed from how tight the white suit he wore showed. His face was lean and his eyes were a clear blue. His blond hair was long, with the ends tied into numerous curls.

Behind him was a shaded window, as well as a single American flag.

Naegi, Togami, and Johnny were taken to meet the president by a man named Blackmore who wore a black coat, carried an umbrella, and wore a strange mask with a rainbow on it. Their eyes were covered and they were guided by Blackmore to where the President was at. There, they met an Italian man named Gyro, who was representing the Italians and who would meet Valentine after Naegi.

He seemed like an OK guy, all things considered. Even with the terrible joke he made concerning.

"Glad to see that you are living up to your name! No edges involved! Na-egi! Get it? It's an original gag of mine! Nyohoho~!"

The joke almost physically hurt.

Naegi was then led into the room by the President's personal bodyguard, Mike O. A dark-skinned man wearing dark yellow attire, with a case to his left hip that showed off long and thick nails.

He was in the room, watching Naegi like a hawk.

"Your treaty requires me to submit any and all information I have to the Future Foundation. To be ready and willing to fight alongside them at a moment's notice, to secede authority to their head members should they visit the United States." Valentine shook his head. "That simply makes me and my country another one of their pawns."

Naegi flinched a bit. "I understand your concerns, Mr. President. But you see, the Future Foundation wanted to..."

"Was this made by that Munakata fellow?" Valentine glared disdainfully at the document. "Truly,
that man is a child. A Hope's Peak graduate who thinks himself to be a leader, when all he is doing is acting like the leader of a gang of kids and thinks anyone who does not follow him is 'evil'. Or 'corrupted by despair'. Whichever he is going with."

"He's easier to get along with when you get to know him." Naegi assured Valentine. "But Mr. President, we need to work together in order to stop the Remnants of Despair. Who knows what damage they can..."

"If they come here, I will fight them to my very last breath. However, I will not do so as a pawn to the Future Foundation. My country is not another pawn on their oh-so grand chessboard."

Naegi tightened his hand into fists. "Don't you understand that we need to work together Mr. President? This is something bigger than just your country. Hope is..."

"This country is hope Makoto Naegi. And you will respect it."

Naegi blinked. He did not expect that response. He had a whole speech planned out and everything. "What?" He looked to the President for clarification, but the man was silent.

He was acting as if he were considering something.

Whatever it was, he made his decision within the span of thirty seconds.

Naegi watched as the President sighed before reaching into his suit. He then pulled out something Naegi did not expect to see.

It was a single white handkerchief, frilly at the edges. Nothing unique about it, save for the date stitched at the bottom edge.

September 20th, 1954.

"This handkerchief once belonged to my father." Valentine's voice was now softer as he stared at the napkin. "He had a habit of putting important dates on objects. Whenever he bought a pair of shoes, he would put the date of when he bought them on it. He did the same for the furniture. From what my mother told me, he stitched the date of their wedding day on his favourite pair of underpants."

"...Huh." Naegi didn't know how to reply to that. From what Valentine was saying, his father was simply a man who had a rather unique habit. "Wouldn't know if I could put my wedding date on my underwear. I wouldn't hear the end of it if anyone found out."

"My father was captured and tortured in the Vietnam War."

That made Naegi's eyes widen in horror. He didn't learn much about war during his school years. He never felt comfortable about the subject.

But he knew enough that this was no small matter.

Valentine's eyes hardened as he said, "I was told that every day, they would ask him how many people were in his company. Where were their position, what weapons they were using... he never answered them. And they would beat him relentlessly time and time again."

Naegi felt sick now, imagining Valentine's father tied to a chair, being hit over and over again and
screamed at whenever he did not give them what they wanted. He had seen the aftermath of the Remnants’ own torture sessions. Their victims were either dead because they did not talk, or reduced to sobbing children if not dead to the world. The pain and mental anguish was too much for them.

"Although he did not say anything, his will was slipping. That much time away from familiar faces, from his family and country... all that pain... his mind was nearly crushed." Valentine then showed Naegi the handkerchief. "But, whenever he felt like he was losing hope, he would look at this handkerchief and regain it. He did everything he could to protect it. This handkerchief..." Valentine was quiet for a second. "It has the date of his most precious memory."

Naegi smiled at that, and felt relief. Valentine's father... even in the face of utter despair, of never seeing his family again and being tortured, he did not lose hope. And it was all connected to this handkerchief.

"He kept it safe, because it reminded him that he was both protecting his family and country. He had the hope that if he kept strong and stayed silent, he could endure the hardships of being a prisoner of war." Valentine gripped the handkerchief a bit more. "But... he had to hide it. If his tortures knew that he had it, they would take it away. He would lose hope. He had to hide it, but they stripped him naked constantly and searched him. Every body part, every fold of skin, his mouth, even his anal cavity... but he hid it. He hid it in the one place they would never look."

"Then... where could he have hidden it?" If his captors really were that thorough to take away their prisoner's hope so that they could crush his spirit entirely, then just where...?

Valentine pointed to his eye.

"His eye was blinded during a beating."

"Y-you don't mean..."

"I do. He gouged out the useless eye, balled up the handkerchief, and put it in the cavity. They knew the eye was useless, and so opening his eyelids would be useless."

Naegi was speechless at that. He knew people did desperate things so that they would not lose hope... Naegi said 'don't lose hope' so much that it was a damn catchphrase of his.

But he never knew someone would go this far to protect theirs.

"But... what other option was there?" The man was being tortured and was slipping. He could not lose his only reminder of what he was protecting, that it was all worth it. "That memory... it must be truly special."

"The date on this handkerchief." Valentine took in a breath, as if to calm himself. "This date is my birthday."

Naegi was silent for a second as he processed this. The thing that kept President Valentine's father going in the face of the horrors of war, was his own son's birthday. "I see..." Naegi muttered as he looked down. "Your father... he was a great man."

Valentine nodded. "My father protected this handkerchief out of patriotism. Patriotism, it's the most beautiful virtue in this world. Animals would risk their lives for the sake of their young, but risking one's life for the pride of their country... to see the act as an extension of protecting their family... to
Naegi looked at him. "But... that is what we need to do in order to fight against the horrors that Dio still has in this world. We must fight together, and if that means risking our lives..."

"Makoto Naegi." Valentine interrupted him. "I am the current President of the United States. It was a blessing that I survived the attack on Washington DC, and my country fought on with the knowledge that I was safe. Time and time again, I raised their spirits when things seemed their bleakest, and I did so knowing that all my efforts were for them." The President intertwined his fingers as he continued to speak. "I am their hope, Makoto Naegi. If I were to die, then they would lose any hope that they have left. I cannot allow for that to happen, for I am and will forever work to keep the United States of America from falling to the likes of Dio Brando."

"Even so, you must know that by working with us, you are helping the rest of the world feel hope. And if you do that, then..."

"Then I too can feel hope? That I do not have to resign myself to being my country's servant?" Naegi felt the room grow slightly colder as Valentine's gaze hardened. "Tell me, is that the words of the Ultimate Hope? Or simply a man who's spitting out whatever the Future Foundation told him?"

Naegi felt anger bubble inside of him at the comment. Of course those were his own thoughts! Why wouldn't they be? Politics was never his forte. Was he actually being used to this degree by the Future Foundation? Was he just fooling himself into thinking their goals were his?

"The citizens of my country draw hope from me." Valentine spoke. "And I get my hope from my country. That's all there is to it. That's all I will ever need."

Naegi was quiet for a few seconds before saying, "You aren't going to change your mind are you?"

"I will decide upon what I shall do when you reach California." The teenager stared in shock at Valentine. "The Midwest's crops need aid, and I refuse to let my people starve."

"But you said..."

"I refuse to the conditions that the Future Foundation set forth. I am making my own offer, my own decision. And I shall do so within that timeframe." Valentine's voice spoke with finality. "Do not think of me as heartless, Makoto Naegi. I do everything for the benefit of the United States of America. This is not done out of pride or hostility, but out of that simple desire."

"Simple..." Naegi sighed before he got up. "I don't know about that." Naegi then proceeded to give a light bow before holding out his hand to the President. "It was an honour talking to you, Mr. President."
Funny Valentine took his hand and shook it. He motioned to Mike O., who nodded and opened the door. Naegi then began moving to the door, his mind deep in thought.

The President was someone who Naegi could not help but admire. He truly loved his country, and believed with all his heart that what he was doing was for its benefit.

"But he's unwilling to accept help that he doesn't like. He wants to help America, but on his own terms. The rest of the world could fall into chaos so long as his country was safe." That was something Naegi could not approve of, no matter how charismatic the President was.

Still, the man did say he was still considering the offer. Valentine would probably change a lot of the conditions sure, but there was still the chance that the United States and Future Foundation could work together to help repair the world.

All Naegi could do now was hope.

He knew the irony of that statement.

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"This is not how things were supposed to go." Togami barely finished his sentence before nearly falling off his horse again.

"You'd think a rich man like yourself would know how to ride a horse." Gyro said, amused at the heir's attempt at looking composed. Especially how miserably he was failing.

He really wanted to laugh at how the great and mighty Byakuya Togami was having trouble staying on his horse. The man who helped slay Dio Brando; barely holding onto a saddle. It was almost as good as one of his jokes.

But he got all of his laughs out long ago. Now it was just enough to put a smile on his face.

Togami sniffed and tried to get into a dignified pose. "I know how to ride a horse. A horse that is properly suited for me." He glared down at the black mustang he had chosen. "Not this discount mule."

The 'discount mule' didn't take kindly to that insult. It sharply tilted to the right too fast to have been accidental and Togami had to summon Gold to keep him on the saddle, letting out an ungentlemanly yelp as he did so.

That got Gyro laughing again. Johnny and Naegi too. All three of them shared a laugh at Togami's expense, which he took as expected. The 'Ultimate Progeny' was paying the price of choosing a horse too similar to him. Prideful and unable to give way.

Naegi's thoroughbred was the opposite. Both the rider and the horse seemed friendly, if nervous, with each other and went at a steady pace. Gyro knew Naegi was coming from a good place, but couldn't help wincing as he gave 'Journey' another promise of an apple. Someone didn't know how
to manage food.

Had he ever needed to learn?

At least he wasn't reckless with his health to the extent that Johnny was. Even with Livin On A Prayer's Hope Bullets, the bandages on Joestar's legs showed blood.

*Still, he showed the drive to learn the Spin.* Gyro could respect that much. Togami had thought Johnny was being an idiot, and Naegi appalled at being unable to help, but they simply didn't understand. Gyro needed to see that determination to teach Johnny Spin.

At the rate they were riding, they'd be half-way through Tennessee in no time. Then it was a matter of reaching Georgia and then a few train rides westwards. Valentine already made the arrangements, after the first train broke down, due to 'technical difficulties'.

The fact that it allowed Gyro to join Naegi, Johnny, and Togami was officially unrelated.

In reality, it was the main reason.

"See if the Ultimate Hope is truly a pawn of the Future Foundation. See if he has the power to change the world." President Valentine had whispered. The conference had ended, and Gyro was meant to return to Italy, when Valentine had cornered him with this offer. "Giovanna would wish to know the same."

That did it for Gyro. It was the truth.

Giorno would have told Gyro to take up the offer immediately. Anything to understand the Ultimate Hope better, after the Future Foundation tried so hard to hide him away. An order was an order, after all.

For the man who killed Passione's former leader, and freed Italy- Gyro's family included- from that monster, he'd do anything.

They continued to ride along, Naegi trying to make friendly talk with Johnny and failing, when they saw the group. They were just by the corner of their eye, to the right of them. Ragged clothes, sunken stomachs, and eyes devoid of hope for the future beyond finding a place to survive another day.

Naegi looked at them and was already reaching for the supply-bag.

"We can't stop for every group. We can't give them all supplies either." Togami said. Gyro had to agree on at least that, with what little they could carry already.

"They're miles from the nearest settlement though." Naegi kept his eyes on the group. Johnny scoffed.

"And? We've barely got enough for ourselves. Someone will come along for them. Right now, we're going to California and we're going to clear my brother's name. So just-" Johnny stopped. They all heard the dry, cracked wail of a baby. A few seconds passed and Johnny growled to himself. "God-fucking-damn it."

Gyro knew they only had enough food for a few more days, between the four of them, at most. That
didn't stop him from smiling at the way Naegi's face beamed at the thought of meeting those people. He could see that Money-Bags was having trouble pretending to be neutral too.

Johnny barely grumbled a few 'your welcomes' as they gave the supplies. It didn't mean he didn't practically shove the milk-bottle down that baby's throat.

This was going to be an interesting trip.

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"You can't be serious." Giorno sat behind his desk and glared. It was enough to make Mitarai want to sink into his seat.

"I am." Kirigiri replied, unmoved by Giorno's anger. "The offer is a start, we're ready to make concessions, but you surely didn't think that an organisation like Passione could operate as it does now and be a legal group?"

Mitarai couldn't shuffle in his seat. He was the head of the 10th Branch of the Future Foundation and, secretly, the only one trusted enough to carry Dio's will. He had to sit firm and meet Giorno's eyes just like Kirigiri was. No sign of fear could be shown.

Sweat still gathered on his forehead, his body betraying his mind, as Giorno and Kirigiri stared each other down. Neither of them looked to be giving ground. Kirigiri had been blunt with the Future Foundation's 'offer', and wasn't even trying to show a way to make it sound better for Giorno.

I should have controlled myself more. Mitarai had spent too much of the dinner complimenting Giorno and all he did. It made him think the Future Foundation would compromise with him. Why had he done that? I got distracted by...

By how much Giorno had reminded him of Dio. The way he emanated authority and almost demanded respect by instinct alone. The entire dinner had focused around Giorno's conversations and preferences. It was like you weren't even talking to a man, but a phenomenon.

He even offered wine like Dio.

"Ryota, you're drunk. Drunk after two glasses." Dio said. He laughed softly at Mitarai as the Ultimate Animator tried to find his balance, kneeling on his bed.

"I'm not drunk. You're drunk." Mitarai muttered. He wasn't pouting either. Dio was just too darn tall, even when Mitarai was on the bed! "I'm not a lightweight."

"You are, Ryota. If you could only see yourself." Dio laughed again and extended a hand.

He held Mitarai as he always liked to, a single hand positioned so that he held the bottom of his chin in his fingers and freeing his thumb to stroke Mitarai's cheek.

No. Mitarai couldn't let himself get lost in memories. Dio was dead to the world. It was all up to Mitarai now to help his friend reach Heaven and create the world of Hope they envisioned.
Dio’s head had been placed somewhere safe. A place that no one would ever suspect to find it, if they even knew about it. Dio was away from all the chaos still happening around the world.

Leaving Mitarai to keep his son safe, even in this luxurious room they had retired to after the dinner.

"Passione will not be as it once was. It will have principles and morals." Giorno leaned towards Kirigiri, the desk being the only thing keeping him from getting any closer. "It will never be a pawn of the Future Foundation."

"We are offering you a place of influence in Italy's future, and that of the world, and a pardon for all members of Passione. This is a way out of crime." Kirigiri replied. "If you continue where you are, Italy will eventually become a rogue state. The nations of the world will know where narcotics, guns, and other black-market goods will come from."

"If the world rebuilds itself. It's not as if you are doing a good job yourself. How many nations has the Future Foundation rebuilt? How many lives did it take?" Giorno asked, voice slowly getting louder. "Bruno Bucciarati, Narancia Ghirga, Leone Abbacchio. All of them gave their lives for the cause. All of them wanted nothing more than to make Italy a beacon of civilisation and freedom in a world of Despair. And now you want me to hand over their sacrifices to you?"

"Do you want to be a mob boss, or do you want to be Italy's protector?" Kirigiri asked. It was like she didn't even notice the room growing colder, despite the roaring fire-place behind them. "If you want to be an honourable mob boss, then fine. I've come around to the idea that you are the lesser evil, even as a criminal. But no one in the Future Foundation will accept you as a leader. No one else in the world."

Mitarai would. He'd stand by Giorno. The way he should have done with Dio.

He knew the story of Giorno Giovanna. One of the good things about having the Chairman of the Future Foundation answer to you was that you learned nearly everything that was happening around the world. So Mitarai knew all about what Giorno was doing before he met this Bruno Bucciarati. The journey he and his friends made across Italy as they fought against Diavolo's minions.

Giorno had made friends and lost so many of them. But he still fought on for their vision, for their Hope. He stood up against Diavolo and reached the top of Italy, becoming Passione's new leader. All of this through his own efforts.

_He really is your son, Dio. Fighting to create a place where people can be happy and free of Despair. Mitarai could already see the price. Giorno couldn't completely hide the bags under his eyes, or the weight pulling him down. He was doing the best he could. But he needs help. He needs to know it's not just him and his friends alone._

"I've been more cooperative than you think," Giorno’s voice had a familiar coldness to it. How could Kirigiri withstand this? "I could have made myself Emperor, Caesar, whatever title I liked. I could have ordered an expansion across Southern Europe. I could have even aligned with the Remnants of Despair. Yet I don't."

"Because you're a good person. Deep down, you know you were doing the right thing." Kirigiri said. She stood up from her seat and looked down at Giorno with unreadable eyes. "We'll talk more in Venice. Just know that this isn't the final offer."

"It sounds like it."
"Only if you see it that way. If you see the thought of having to answer to another as surrender, and the idea of being able to be both a criminal and a statesman as acceptable, then it's impossible."
Kirigiri took three steps towards the door before stopping. She turned her head towards Giorno.
"When will you be full?"

Giorno's eyes widened and he met her stare.

"You take Italy, you take Southern Europe, maybe you fight off the Future Foundation and Remnants and rule over Europe. When does it stop? When you rule over everything?" Kirigiri asked. Her expression softened. "Ambition is a dark path, Giorno. I and others hope you can turn back. Don't vindicate those who doubt in you."

On that final word, Kirigiri finally left the room. Mitarai wondered why she hadn't made him come with her, unless she didn't want to under-cut his authority. Maybe she knew that he couldn't change the terms of the deal.

Why did Tengan let Munakata write the terms? Was it to blame him if it failed? Mitarai wondered if he shouldn't have had Miss Yukizome be the one to show Tengan the brainwashing programme. She may have used too much Despair, with the complications it brought.

It wasn't fair on Giorno. He had the burden of an entire nation on his back and now this. The choice between submitting and fighting against the very forces of Hope he was meant to be a part of. All that for a teenager.

Mitarai could do something about it. He could do whatever he could to lighten the burden. Just as he tried with Dio. Just as he should have tried harder with Dio.

It was worse with Giorno; who didn't have his father's visions or the guiding light of Heaven. All he had was a dream of reaching the top and doing good by his people. Now the Future Foundation and the Remnants of Despair had come to ruin the peace he created. He was just a child as well.

Someone had to protect him, and it'd have to be Mitarai.

"Were you close?" Mitarai asked. He had been too quiet as Giorno's head shot towards him. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to startle you. It was just those people you mentioned...were they your friends?"

Giorno scoffed. "Abbacchio once gave me a tea-cup filled with urine, Narancia was a total brat, and Bruno almost killed me when we first met." Mitarai couldn't keep the horror off his face, which apparently made Giorno laugh. He smiled wistfully. "They were some of the greatest men I ever knew."

"I had a friend too. He died a while ago." Mitarai wondered if Dio ever blamed him for what happened. For not being there for him, as Dio had been there for Mitarai so many times. "I could never be like him. He was strong, intelligent, cultured, and he made you feel comfortable around him. All he ever wanted was to find happiness. To find his Heaven. And he died so close to it."

Mitarai couldn't tell what Giorno was thinking. Did he feel sorry for Mitarai? Or did he simply think that Mitarai was lucky to lose only a single friend rather than three. The two just sat in silence and looked at each other, when Giorno finally broke the silence.

"Diavolo. Diavolo was the former leader of Passione. A man who wanted to build a new Roman
Empire as its secret ruler. We fought to stop him and lost those three for it." Giorno's expression didn't change, as if he was still registering the memory. Then he smiled. "I feel comfortable about you, Mitarai. You don't think of me as a thug like the Future Foundation does."

"Asahina probably likes you now." Mitarai smiled as he remembered Asahina gushing about the food. She may have been fond of doughnuts, but she loved the chocolate pudding.

"Maybe. With you, it's more than that. I feel as if you know that this offer is just blackmail." Giorno looked at Mitarai with eyes even he couldn't read. He was so much like Dio it was unnerving. "Do you think I am a good man?"

"Yes." Mitarai replied. He didn't even hesitate in the next sentence. "I think you're an even greater Hope than Makoto Naegi."

Giorno was great at hiding his emotions, but even he couldn't hide the shock on his face. Maybe he never expected such a high compliment from even Mitarai. It might have been why he smiled and opened up one of the desk drawers. First he pulled out a red bottle, and next he pulled out two wine glasses.

Mitarai couldn't stop himself from getting nervous. He appreciated the gesture, and knew what it was like to get drunk thanks to Dio, but Giorno wasn't of legal age. Even if biologically was, chronologically-

*But, that's not the worst law he's broken. He is Dio's son.* Mitarai wasn't going to refuse Dio's son something so minor as underage drinking. He was already a fully-grown adult in all but age. Smiling and taking a sip of the wine poured into his glass was nothing to what he'd do for Giorno.

So the two began drinking and talking about a great many things. What Mitarai and Giorno's jobs entailed, the craziest stories they had heard, and even a trick that Giorno could do with his ear.

Mitarai unfortunately, whether due to the sight of the trick or being on his third glass, vomited after seeing the ear-hole.

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"Ibuki's in the house! Here to play the sweetest tunes this side of the States!" Mioda then threw her hand down and began playing a guitar solo unlike anything Togami had ever heard before.

It was painful. Not just because it was even more loud and obnoxious than that particular style of music, but because of what came out of that damn guitar. About a dozen visible waves of purple energy burst from the guitar and flew towards the four travellers.

They all managed to get out of the way in time. The horses they had chosen, even Togami's Spandau, had an intelligence about them and knew to avoid the thin waves of energy that crashed against the rock formation behind them and made them crumble. Johnny turned back and his eyes widened at the broken stone.

"S-She cut made those mounds explode like they were nothing!" Johnny cried out. Hanamura tried
to say something, but the gag in his mouth kept him from vocalising his perversions.

"That's right, Shitty JoJo!" Mioda cried out, standing on top of one of the many stone hills that surrounded the group. "Feel The Noize makes Ibuki's music not just rockin' but explodin'! That's not all it can do!"

Just what they needed.

The plan to cut through the journey by taking the trains through the South had failed miserably. Hanamura, the Ultimate Chef, had been there waiting for them and had almost taken all of them out with his Adam's Apple. The Stand poisoned their food and almost killed him, if Naegi hadn't figured it out in time.

It was also thanks to the appearance of Johnny's new Stand, Tusk, that they had brought down the Ultimate Chief.

The Chief had not planned for Johnny to launch nail bullets from his foot, turning his left arm into near-hamburger and a single nail bullet from his right hand going through his right cheek and out the mouth, taking several teeth with it.

It was only thanks to Gyro that the Chief even still had an arm.

Togami did not know what to think about the recent development. Tusk's appearance meant that Jonathan Joestar had a Stand, which also meant that he must have gotten it from Dio. What other way was there for a Person to get a Stand, if not from the arrow?

But both Johnny and Naegi were adamant over the possibility that Jonathan was killed by Dio, fought him rather than joined him.

So Togami dropped the topic. It was pointless to argue.

But it was still something he kept in the back of his mind.

The Chef was as the reports said. Proud of his work, both in culinary and Despair, all in the name of Dio Brando. He'd been a vicious creature when captured, for all the sexual jokes about being tied up, the second he saw Naegi. He screamed of how he'd be tortured and killed for what he did to Dio.

Togami almost felt insulted that the Remnants of Despair seemed to be blaming Naegi alone for Dio's death.

Johnny had favoured killing him the second they got off from the train. All the people he killed and tortured was enough to deserve the death penalty and it wasn't like they could turn back. The whole train had been wrecked, a small miracle being that no one died or was badly wounded. Better to simply take him out and move on.

Hanamura hadn't helped his case by insulting Johnny as 'JoJo's trash brother' and 'noodle-legs'.

Naegi disagreed. He wanted to drop Hanamura off to one of the Future Foundation bases they had hidden in the area- Fourteenth Branch bases at that- and send him to prison from there. Togami hadn't liked it, but agreed with Naegi nonetheless. If the theory about mind-control was true...

Either way, Johnny hadn't been happy about the detour, but it was the best they could do. They'd
need to decide a new route West anyway and Hanamura's capture meant that something of value came from the disaster.

Only now it just meant another thing to look out for with all these Remnants of Despair.

"What the hell is up with this 'Shitty JoJo' crap?" Johnny snapped. He looked up towards the cliffs and glared at Mioda. "You think you're his friends? After everything you've done? After becoming Dio's pets?!"

"That is exactly right!" A loud and booming voice roared through the open air and was followed by an eagle's cry.

It was him. One of the few Remnants of Despair whose insanity didn’t completely overshadow their competence. Someone whose Stand was terrifying and devastating in a thousand different ways.

The straitjacket had been replaced by rags and other materials that were sloppily sewn together. Bar a pristine black cape that went from his neck down to his heels, when it wasn't blowing in the wind, there was nothing to suggest that this man had been anywhere near civilisation.

Gundham Tanaka's hamsters all had their own position on his arms as they were stretched out towards his left and right. They were joined by a hawk, an eagle, and all sorts of winged creatures. Wolves, bears, snakes, and other land animals waited by his feet, just waiting to pounce when needed.

The Ultimate Breeder was here. Here alongside the Ultimate Light Musician and Ultimate Chef. This couldn't be a coincidence. This was planned.

"Jorge Joestar; your brother was an angel of Hope sent down from the heavens to show us a kinder world. He brought us together with the help of two others." Tanaka's attention was directly only on Johnny, who only glared in reply. Togami used this time to tighten Hanamura's restraints. "It was because of him that we felt Hope, and then witnessed its futility against Lord Dio's magnificence!"

"So it's true. Dio killed Jonathan Joestar." Togami knew few would believe the words of a Remnant of Despair. But he knew they weren't lying.

"Hey! It wasn't like that!" Mioda barked those words out. There was no trace of her usual joviality there. Just anger. "JoJo sacrificed himself!"

Tanaka's form shook as they could hear him crying above. "To cast aside his life for his best friend's ambitions. To show us how Despair shall always devour Hope! JoJo..."

Mioda played a slow and mournful tune on her guitar and Hanamura even wailed from his gag. There was no doubt about it, they were embracing Despair even now. For all their tears, Togami knew they weren't mourning a friend's murder, but paying tribute to some noble martyrdom.

Despair hadn't just warped their minds. It looked like it had warped their souls too.

*They probably played a part in killing Jonathan himself. Or...* Togami turned to Naegi and was briefly thankful that Johnny was the centre of attention. He remembered what Kirigiri had suggested about the former Class 77-B. That trauma may have helped break them. *Was this how Dio dragged them into Despair?*
It was a miracle that Johnny hadn't attacked already, let alone lost his temper. "You shut the hell up! How dare you talk about Jonathan!" Johnny's new Stand hovered behind him as he pointed right at Tanaka. "You stand there acting like you were his friends, but you're just licking Dio's-

A loud strum of the guitar filled the air and Togami spun his head towards Mioda. Feel The Noize's sound-wave was flying right towards Johnny when Slow Dancer bolted to the right, barely getting Johnny out of there with only a surface cut on his left arm.

"Hey! Shitty JoJo! This isn't your song!" Mioda shouted back. The tears were still running down her eyes, although they subsided when she focused her mind on a guitar solo.

"This is a test, Jorge!" Tanaka's voice could somehow be heard over the music. "Shall the Lesser JoJo, the fallen brother, overcome himself and be worthy of Jonathan's blood? Or are you as Lord Dio saw you; nothing more than a worm who was rightfully struck down? Ibuki. Kazuichi. Ready yourselves."

Kazuichi Souda was here as well? Yes. There he was. He'd been hiding behind the very same stone hill that Tanaka and Mioda had stood on top of. The black jumper and trousers both had white streaks going down both sides of his uniform and was entirely stained with blood. He was missing a few teeth and held a wrench in his hand.

Behind him was Welcome To The Machine. No one had ever seen the creature that allowed the Ultimate Mechanic to torture so many, it was an unwelcome honour for Togami. It was a metallic-silver creature that stood on four legs and looked to be a mixture of a triceratops, with the spikes coming out of its neck, and an armadillo. Its body was made up of a giant engine that hummed and readied to roar when ready. It rested on Souda's back and glared at Johnny.

Mioda jumped from the hill and strummed a few notes on her guitar. Feel The Noize finally burst out from the guitar and travelled down the sound-waves emitted, Togami barely seeing the purple Stand reveals its head and palms. Speakers blared as the sound-wave grew larger until it smashed against the ground. The explosion was enough to break Mioda's initial fall and make her fly towards the group. Gyro had his steel-balls ready before Mioda landed on her feet, stumbling to get back in line to Souda's left.

Tanaka didn't need to jump. His 'Dark Devas of Destruction' burrowed into him and the other animals either took flight or ran as he jumped up and allowed Welcome To The Jungle to turn his arms into wings themselves. That Stand seemed strange to Togami. As if its appearance changed shape depending on the animal Tanaka wanted to copy. Its form had been the skeletal structure of the hawk wings that Tanaka had given himself, flapping them so that he would land to Souda's right.

It was better than Hanamura's claim that Adam's Apple was simply thousands of miniature pure-white versions of himself.

The Remnants of Despair immediately spread themselves out into a circle. Souda stayed where he was, whilst Mioda moved to face Johnny and Tanaka moved to face Gyro, and Hanamura began to struggle more than he ever had done before.

Four Remnants of Despair? How was this even possible? Despair had sabotaged their attempts to cooperate before. Had Naegi's presence forced their hand? Or was this all for Johnny himself?

Johnny himself seemed ready for a fight. Just the mention of his brother had made him take leave of
all his senses and it'd be up to them to make him calm down. Until then, Togami made Spandau position itself so that it was covering Naegi and Journey. Gyro handled a certain Joestar.

"Johnny, don't be stupid. We just need to find an exit point and run." He whispered, just loud enough so that Togami and Naegi could hear it as well.

Naegi's doubt made Togami swear under his breath because he knew exactly why. The group that Naegi had given those supplies, against Johnny's firmly-put 'advice', wasn't too far away from them.

"But what about the people we met back-"

"Shut up. Don't be an idiot! They'll come after us first." Johnny snapped, whilst still whispering.

It made sense. The Remnants of Despair would mainly want to either capture or kill Naegi, and to 'test' Johnny, if what Tanaka said was true. If they ran, and tried to throw back the Remnants until they reached safer ground, they could lure them away from the civilians.

Unless the Remnants decided to go to the refugee group and torture them to lure Naegi out, or simply to bring them Despair. Johnny was being too logical about the Remnants, but Naegi was being too emotional.

*Enough dilly-dallying. It's time for action.* If they didn't make the first move, the Remnants would.

Togami summoned Gold and used it to throw Hanamura onto the ground. The Ultimate Chef's legs had been tied together and he had been thrown in the middle of the group, leaving little path for him to escape. It freed Togami's attention towards his opponent.

Gyro had his steel-balls in hand, Johnny had Tusk, and Naegi's Livin' On A Prayer was ready to lend assistance if need be.

Not that he'd be allowed near the action. The Remnants had initially focused on Johnny first, but had finally noticed the presence of the Ultimate Hope. The one who had ended Dio's reign of terror over the world.

"I shall test you in time, Jorge. But first," Tanaka's red eyes shifted over to Naegi. The venom alone in his glare made Togami's partner shake on his saddle; even Journey stumbling back from fright.

"We have plans for you, Makoto Naegi. Submit now and we shall moderate the Hell we have planned for you."

"Speak for yourself." Souda said. He motioned to Naegi with his wrench. "Komaeda's gonna be perving over a bloody pile of flesh when we're done with you!"

*Komaeda*. The memory of that disgusting creature made Togami shiver in humiliation. He hadn't lost. He'd been crushed by Get Lucky. If it hadn't been for Komaru, Fukawa, and Kishibe, he didn't want to think about what his failure would have meant. *I swear, on the Togami name, that I will redeem myself after that disgrace!*

The battle lines were drawn. Johnny faced down Mioda, Gyro against Tanaka, and Togami himself stared at the Ultimate Mechanic with every last bit of derision for the fool. His Despair would be his own undoing. Gold would wipe the floor with him, especially as Togami had Spandau to give him more speed.
The three fights began almost simultaneously.

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"Well, well, well," Koizumi grinned as she looked at the picture she just took. "Aren't these just the cutest couple? A Detective who doesn't know how to mind her own business, and a brat whose Stand is about not minding its business."

Asahina wanted to wipe that stupid smile off her face. She didn't have to turn to know that Trish wanted to do the exact same thing. To make Mahiru Koizumi pay for all the innocent people she killed.

But that'd be what Koizumi wanted them to do. Charge ahead and get caught by her Stand.

To be trapped inside the photograph.

*Kirigiri pulled me out of the way. If it wasn't for her...* Asahina couldn't spit on that sacrifice by letting her emotions get the better of her. She had to be smart.

Smart like Koizumi. Asahina couldn't remember why the four of them had been pulled away from the others. There was an attack by Ultimate Despair when they finally arrived in Venice and there was...no one? No one by the shadows of the streets, holding onto a detonator, as they destroyed a building.

But it had to have been someone. Someone who Asahina, Kirigiri Trish, and Sheila had chased down to this building, too far from the rivers of Venice and too high-up from the sewers for Asahina to blast Koizumi away with all the water she liked. The Ocean could summon water, but more was better in cases like these.

Especially when the enemy had a Stand that involved using a camera.

"Aaw, I wish you could see this. Looks like they found out the secret of Into The Lens." Koizumi said to the photo. She giggled to herself. "I'm going to kill four of you at once. The Heir's gonna love the shit out of me this time. Not that slutty nurse, or that bitch of a Queen."

"Koizumi, you're detracting from the point." A voice said. It sounded like it was from behind Koizumi, but that couldn't be it. There was nothing behind the member of Ultimate Despair but the half-ruined wall. There was a shape of something, almost like that of a human, but Asahina wasn’t seeing it.

"Who was that? Is this another member of Ultimate Despair?" Trish snapped. She glared at the same space as Asahina.

"Don't ask me. I thought he was with you Passione weirdos." Koizumi turned and stared at where the floor probably creaked.

There was Asahina's chance! The Ocean emerged and threw its arms towards Koizumi, unleashing a burst of water from each arm, the waves going straight for Koizumi. They flanked her left and right, leaving nowhere for her to run to.
The Ultimate Photographer was meant to be caught between the two torrents that crashed into each other, Koizumi’s form disappearing between the pillars of water.

She instead vanished from sight.

"Wha-?"

"Asahina, get down!" Trish screamed and grabbed Asahina, before she could turn, and the two girls fell forward. More Trish falling and taking Asahina with her.

The sound of a camera flash hit Asahina's back and she realised what was going on.

*She wanted me to turn around so that I'd look into the flash.* That was how her Stand worked. If she took a picture of someone and their eyes were caught into it, they'd be dragged into the camera like Kirigiri and Sheila were.

But how did she move so quickly?

Asahina turned to see the answer before her. There was Koizumi, smiling sharply with the blood-red eyes of Despair, as she stood in front of what looked like a picture frame depicting the wall that Asahina and Trish were facing their backs to. *Into The Lens* didn't just let Koizumi trap her enemies; it allowed her to move from place to place.

She thought it'd hurt to move after being thrown to the ground so violently, but it felt different. The hard floor instead felt like she was falling on a pile of pillows. How was that happening?

The answer came when Asahina saw the pink human-looking Stand next to Trish. Her Stand was prettier than *The Ocean* (not that Asahina would say it out loud and hurt its feelings), but Asahina never knew about what it could do. It was the same with the rest of Passione's Stand users. She knew nothing about them.

"Spice Girl softened the floor." Trish said, gritting her teeth. The two girls kept their distance from Koizumi, who was happy to sit and watch the two squirm. "We can't leave, but just who the hell was that talking?"

"Someone was talking?" Asahina heard something, but was it a someone? Trish seemed amazed that Asahina would even question it.

"Y-" Trish stopped and bit her lip. "I think they were. I heard something speak behind her. Or was that her Stand?"

Just what was going on?

"I see you have everything under control here." A voice said.

And it was definitely a voice! Asahina and Trish looked to find that it was Sagishi, the Ultimate Imposter! She may have neglected to read all the files on the Remnants of Despair, but she knew enough about this Stand user. The one who could sneak into any facility and caused so much damage during the Tragedy.

They said the only tell was his weight. It would change between him being as fat as Yamada to
looking like one of those teenage models who starved themselves to fit size zeros. Asahina couldn't look at Togami for a week after seeing some of the pictures of the Imposter.

No one had ever managed to see his Stand before. They said it was impossible. That invisibility must have been its power. But there it was! Completely white all over except for its head, a head that looked exactly like Togami's. If his glasses were thick-lenses and every facial feature from his ears to his chin were doubled in size. It was almost funny.

Asahina didn't get it though. When did he manage to sneak into the room without either Asahina or Trish noticing? Koizumi didn't even notice, from the shocked and angry look on her face.

"I'll hand the rest of Passione." He said. His tone was that of a superior commanding their subordinate.

"Sagishi?! When the hell did-" Koizumi looked back at the Stand and looked even angrier. "You flip-flopping, anorexic, mouth-stuffing...fatty-puke-pig! What happened to not using Land of Confusion on us?"

"Queen Sonia and Fuyuhiko wanted a change in plans. In case you failed to get the job done." The Imposter replied, already moving to exit the door that Asahina and Trish has chased Koizumi through.

Did he really think they were just going to let him go?

"You're not getting to Giorno that easily!" Trish already had Spice Girl flying towards Sagishi before Asahina could say anything. It didn't even close half the gap before Asahina saw 'Land of Confusion's' head lift and sink down on Sagishi's while its body melded with his own. His face and skin turned into a transparent...what was she looking at?

"Wha-He vanished!" Trish yelped. Spice Girl looked around and couldn't find Saghishi anywhere. Asahina could have sworn she saw him walk through the front door.

"No, he just walked away. He-it-what were we even talking about?" Asahina saw something go through that door. It must have just been the wind, even if it was making noises that sounded like steps.

She had to focus! There had to be a way to stop Koizumi without having her eyes get caught by Into The Lens. She just had to think. Find a way to use The Ocean to her advantage. What would Kirigiri do? What would she notice about her surroundings that Asahina was missing in this dark, damp, dreary room?

That's it!

Koizumi was taking her time talking to the two girls while Asahina began her plan.

"You know, I'm jealous of you, Una." Koizumi said. She didn't move at all, unless she'd lose her escape route. 'I'm not exactly a bombshell. Oh, I got that 'girl next door' appeal, but I haven't got a real niche. Mikan's got masochism. Sonia's got being a Queen. Hiyoko's got cuteness. Akane's had hands on her since puberty with that bod. Fuck, even Peko's filling some fetish! Me? I'm just ordinary.

"Lord Dio never chose me first. It was always Sonia, Mikan, or Akane if he felt sporty. That was just
the girls. Boys got picked over me too. But when he chose me..." Koizumi shuddered and Asahina heard the drool hit the floor. "But you? You get the big bad Giorno Giovanna to yourself, if he ever wants a woman. Come on, between us girls, how does he fuck?"

Asahina felt the anger boiling inside Trish. She shared it too. If Kirigiri was right about the Remnants of Despair; that they didn't choose this life, then Dio was even more despicable. To have made all of them do something like that? Unforgivable.

But she couldn’t let herself be distracted. She had to focus on her plan if she wanted to catch Koizumi by surprise.

The Ocean could manipulate water, but it came at a weakness. It was obvious when Asahina was summoning water from the Stand itself, instead of a source like a river or sewer, and she could only make an area around her of 2m become like water. The place where she'd easily disarm Koizumi and make her free her friends.

But Kirigiri would have noticed that there was water around Asahina the whole time. Not in the air, where it was too small to really use on the scale she needed, but in the room itself. The kind of room that the people of Venice suffered from because of the Tragedy, despite the government and Passione's best efforts. A room that could be cramped, or damaged, or even damp.

In a way, it was justice that a condition forced by Ultimate Despair would be what allowed Asahina to defeat this Remnant of Despair.

The Ocean manifested and raised its hands, summoning all the water from the damp and throwing it down towards Koizumi. The rush of the water masked all other sound. The Ultimate Photographer barely had a chance to gasp out in shock as Asahina and Trish turned to face their opponent. That look of dismay and fear was all Asahina needed to see to know that they had won.

Spice Girl rushed over towards Koizumi and pulled its fist back. It was ready to deliver a punishing blow on Koizumi and let the two girls capture the Remnant of Despair. To make her reveal the secrets of her Stand.

Only for Koizumi to relax her form and drop down deeper than what seemed humanly possible.

What's she- Asahina's thoughts were cut off by the sight of another picture-frame just by Koizumi's feet that she willingly sunk into. Not to mention the frame behind her that was now gone. She fell too fast for The Ocean or Spice Girl to catch her in time and she disappeared from sight.

A loud cackle kept the Ultimate Swimmer from panicking as she and Trish ran towards the window again to look out at the building opposite. Just above them, standing on top of the roof, and whispering into her camera, was Mahiru Koizumi.

"It's a good thing Ultimate Despair are goddamn idiots." Trish muttered, as she stared back at the wall where Koizumi initially had her giant picture frame. Asahina turned to find that the wall behind Koizumi now had a massive hole in it.

"Your Stand did that?" Asahina had only ever seen one Stand with that level of physical power and that had been Holy Diver. To think that such a pretty Stand could be so strong! "It's even stronger than Gold, when it comes to the punches."

"That's not even its biggest strength. I got a story about a Stand on an airplane you'd love to hear."
Trish said, smirking at the memory. Any humour left her face, however, when she looked up at Koizumi. "First we need to save Kirigiri and Sheila. Who knows what they're going through in there. If she gets away with them..."

Asahina knew what fate awaited the victims of the Remnants of Despair. For someone like Kirigiri, who'd been one of the people who killed Dio, it'd be a thousand times worse. They'd try to destroy her and make her beg for death.

She wouldn't let that happen. She wouldn't fail another friend!

*Kirigiri, I'll rescue you!* There was plenty of water still remaining after Asahina had focused all the damp in the room onto one spot. It'd just be enough to propel them up towards the roof and give Koizumi little time to react or run.

They'd probably have to rely on Spice Girl to grab the roof ledge, though.

"Hang on tight!" Asahina crouched down and offered her back for Trish to hold onto. Holding onto someone like her was easy for Asahina, as Trish put her legs inside the gap left by Asahina's arms, hooked them around her chest, and wrapped her own around the swimmer's neck.

The water gathered around Asahina's feet and legs before shooting off towards the rooftop just opposite them. The water easily managed to get them close enough that Spice Girl could reach out and grab the roof itself. With a single push-up, Trish's Stand sent the two girls flying up into the sky and towards the roof where they landed on their feet.

Koizumi should have chosen somewhere as far as possible from their location, unless there was a limit to Into The Lens that Asahina didn't know about. She should have run the second she got out of that room. She should have never tried to mess with Asahina's friends.

That was why the next thing she saw, as she spent her time swearing into the camera-lens, were two very angry girls who had a bone to pick with her.

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Naegi had heard the story of a plague in 1518 that infected four hundred people. It was in a town in what was once the Holy Roman Empire that was inflicted by this disease. One day, a woman was infected and then that was it. In a matter of days, the victims went from a single woman to thirty-four people to even over four-hundred.

No one could explain why it had happened. No one could explain how it had ended in just a single month. It was as if it struck in a single moment and then left to never be heard from again. There were theories about how it spread so fast, from the diet the people consumed to even the authorities failing to respond properly, the truth was lost. It was just something that had happened and never would again.

Until the Tragedy.

"Look! Everyone's watching me dance." Saionji was shouting her words for everyone to hear as she glided forward.
Behind her was a small mass of about two dozen people, adults and children, all dancing behind her. There was no coordination between them as everyone looked like they were dancing to their own rhythm without concern for what Saionji was doing. It might have been a fun sight, on any other circumstance.

Naegi didn't need to look hard at the crowd to know that they weren't dancing of their own free will. That they were hot, tired, and most of all scared, about what they were being forced to do.

Not that the Ultimate Traditional Dancer cared. "Y'know, it's rude to try and upstage someone. Especially the lead dancer. You guys need to cool your heels." She said, voice still carrying over the empty plains. She sounded too joyful to be honest. "Oh look, I just found the perfect way to do that."

Naegi didn't need to use binoculars or anything like that to see the massive lake that Saionji was pointing towards. A piece of nature that had been spared from the devastation of the Tragedy until now. He also didn't need to think too hard to realise what she was planning, as she led the crowd towards the lake itself, over screams and pleas otherwise.

Naegi, Togami, Gyro, and Johnny waited by a far-off hill where they could just barely make out the crowd ahead of them. They were laying down against the ridge so that they couldn't be spotted by anyone near Saionji. Tanaka's scouts were everywhere.

The group had been facing hard times ever since they went their own way. The Remnants of Despair were chasing them down wherever they went and forcing them into more battles.

They'd been lucky enough that they avoided attention for the last few days, until now. Johnny had wanted to avoid investigating the empty camp-sites, but Naegi had over-ruled him. The blood was still fresh, meaning that the people could have still been alive.

Here they were now! Victims of the very same plague that had killed all those people in that town over five hundred years ago!

It was not a virus, or a bacterial infection, but instead the loss of control that made hundreds of people dance in the town-square. For a whole month they danced without end. The local officials and physicians made them a stage and gave supplies, thinking that they'd dance themselves into exhaustion, or lose the passion that drove them.

But it wasn't passion! They had no choice but to dance without end until they died of exhaustion, strokes, and heart-attacks. The cruel and unforgiving sickness that Hiyoko Saionji had returned to the world.

The Dancing Plague.

"We need to do something." Naegi turned to Togami, who was surveying the scene with his binoculars. The Remnants rarely attacked alone now, unless it was to divide the group. "Are there any other Despairs out there? What about Mountain Tim? He said he was investigating this area for something."

"From this distance, it's hard to say," Togami said. He looked down towards the mass of people and moved his thumb to turn the binocular's lens, zooming in closer on the crowd. "I need to get a closer-"
That was when Naegi heard Togami's fingers tap against the binoculars, his foot step in time against the ground, and it almost liked he was moving his hips left and right. Only he was clearly gritting his teeth and fighting every movement. Gyro noticed it as well.

"Come on, Money-Bags. Now's not the time to be impersonating Slow Dancer. Nyohoho~." Gyro said, laughing at his own (terrible) joke. Until he looked at the same place as Togami and his own body started to move to a rhythm.

"Gyro, there's more subtle ways to scratch an itch." Johnny grunted, although there was a suspicious edge to it. It as vindicated as Gyro and Togami almost seemed unable to look away, and were slowly crawling forwards.

Naegi and Johnny looked at each other and snatched the binoculars away from Togami and Gyro respectively. As soon as they were removed, Togami and Gyro both seemed to regain their senses. Each of them were taking deep breathes.

"Her Stand. What's it called?" Gyro's voice lost all of its humour.

"Safety Dance." Togami replied. "Anyone who looks at her dance, or hears the noise emitted by her Stand, are forced to dance along to her. She's killed hundreds by exhausting them alone. All she needs is to simply tap her foot in rhythm, or have her Stand make a noise, and they're trapped."

"So we break her legs. Then take her out." Johnny said. "Gyro, do you think you could-"

"Johnny," Naegi decided to be blunt. Johnny may not have a lot of physical strength, but his words could pack a punch, and he didn't appreciate Naegi's efforts at being diplomatic before. "We can't just kill her. We can't cripple her either."

"Why not?" Johnny asked. Naegi was about to explain why when Togami interrupted him.

"Naegi, we don't have enough evidence to suggest that it's true. Besides, we can't endanger ourselves, even if it is the case. They're like dangerous animals." He said, standing up and moving towards the horses.

"But they're not animals. They're people. People who may be victims of Dio as well."

Johnny pointed to the crowd. "Those people might disagree. Hell, if Mountain Tim's down there, he'd disagree too. At the end of the day, it's them or us. We have to go this way and we need to take her out to make it."

It had been made clear early on that Johnny wasn't one for idealism. He'd taken the view that, if they didn't kill the Remnants, the Remnants would keep coming after them until they were dead. In a way, he was right, but it was how matter-of-fact he was about it.

What if the Remnants were brainwashed, or had been forced into Despair? They'd be killing people for a choice they didn't even make? Were they just supposed to accept that they were just wild dogs now?

Naegi couldn't do that. There had to be a way that he could get Saionji to stop, or at least knock her out otherwise. Livin' On A Prayer hadn't worked so far, but he hadn't gotten where he was by giving up!
"Togami, I have an idea." Naegi said, turning to Johnny. "Johnny, we can't let them take you. If Mioda is right, they seem almost attached to you, and that's almost worse than them wanting you dead. Me? They hate me. She'll forget about the people she has trapped and focus on me."

"She'll torture you, if she catches you in her Stand." Gyro pointed out.

"That doesn't have to be the end of it. There is a weakness to Safety Dance." Naegi glared down at the distant mass of people, all slowly moving towards their doom if they didn't get there soon. "It keeps you from directly attacking her, but you can indirectly try to stop her. It's happened before. I can still use my Stand on her."

"What does that mean?" Johnny didn't seem convinced.

"It means I will distract her." Togami said, standing up and straightening his tie. As if his suit wasn't already ruined by days of riding and camping out. Naegi was about to say something when he got the infamous Togami Glare. "You and Johnny are too important to risk. Your Luck is also too chaotic to trust to protect you. I won't stain the Togami name by letting you two throw yourselves in the way."

Naegi couldn't argue with that. "Try not to kill or cripple her. If Ultimate Despair think she's useless..."

Johnny scoffed at that, making Naegi swallow down an annoyed reply. It wasn't that he was upset with this particular instance, but that this was another one of Johnny's ways of spitting on Naegi. From trying to help the people roaming these lands, to complaining about how they weren't killing the Remnants, to even shouting at Naegi whenever he tried to help with Johnny's disability! It was like Naegi just annoyed him. The only time they got along was when they were laughing at Togami's stuffiness.

Gyro was someone he got along better with. They were on a similar wavelength when it came to the Despairs and horse-riding. Gyro got along with everyone, apart from Togami. The heir was always the butt of Gyro's (not-so great) jokes. He even taught Naegi some horde-riding tricks while Johnny was busy with Spin.

Yet it hadn't worked to break the divide between Naegi and Johnny. What made it worse was the constant roaming for supplies and fending off attacks. It was like the Remnants of Despair never needed to eat or sleep!

Maybe it was what the Remnants were saying as well that made Johnny want them dead. The way they spoke about him, and the way they spoke about Jonathan.

*That stuff they said about Jonathan. Him 'sacrificing himself'. All that and they called Johnny stuff like 'Lesser JoJo', 'Shitty JoJo', and even 'Crippled JoJo'. As if their friend's younger brother deserved their hate more than his killer. Just because he wasn't as hopeful as they described Jonathan? Johnny's so different from him. It's like they're not even related.*

Either way, Johnny had something grim about him. He was so determined to learn the Spin, or to reach California (Naegi wondered when he'd tell the truth about that), that it almost wasn't even Hope. Well, not any Hope that Naegi recognised.

It was a darker Hope. The kind of Hope that Komaru had accidentally inspired in the adults of Towa
City. Something almost as toxic as Despair when allowed to rule over someone. Was that what Johnny had for his desire to walk again, or to avenge the memory of his brother?

A dark determination?

Naegi didn't know, but whatever it was, it wasn't the only thing that kept Johnny and him from getting along.

"I'm going with you." Johnny said. Naegi wondered if it was so obvious when he was about to speak. "Shut up. She'll focus on me too, more than Mister Stick-Up-The-Ass over here, and we can use that. Might even get a laugh with my legs." He said those last words like it was a joke. An unfunny one.

Whatever Togami was thinking when he nodded, it wasn't what Naegi was thinking. Were they really going to let Johnny and Togami go out there and risk themselves? Was Naegi supposed to just stay with Gyro? Just sit and watch as they risked themselves?

Johnny may have had Tusk Act 2, but he needed protection just as much as Naegi did!

In fact, Tusk Act 2 was a surprise all on its own. Johnny had gotten it after Gyro gave Johnny an abridged lesson during their fight against Mioda and Tanaka about the Golden Rectangle. Despite his doubts about his ability to pull it off (earning a punch from Gyro), Johnny had managed to figure out the Golden Rectangle.

And at the same moment, Tusk had evolved into Act 2.

The Remnants were caught completely off guard by Act 2, and that moment of hesitation was all Johnny needed to fire a bullet from his position to Mioda's right thigh. It created a hole, black as night, before it began to travel up her thigh, heading to her waist and clearly aiming to put a hole somewhere important.

It was only thanks to the Remnant's tactical retreat at the introduction of the new element that Johnny did not succeed. But he had managed to create a deep gash in Mioda's thigh.

But despite that, Naegi could not help but worry. Yet he didn't have a choice in the matter. All he could do was hope that Togami and Johnny- neither of who were exactly social butterflies- to work together enough to save those people.

All the Ultimate Hope had to do was hope.

Funny that.

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"Talk you piece of shit!!"

Mista crossed his arms as Fugo kicked Mahiru Koizumi in the face, causing her to fall back on the floor. He didn't let up as he followed up with several more stomps.
"You have any idea how many men we lost because of you psychos!?" Fugo snarled out at the downed girl. "I'm glad you're here you know, so I can make you pay for each and every one!"

Fugo was angrier than usual, furious actually. Mista could understand where he was coming from. Thanks to his position, Fugo conversed a lot with with the 'lower level' guys. Some of the people that the Remnants killed were probably people he liked.

And after losing Narancia, Abaccchio, and Bruno... it was really lucky for the photographer that she wasn't dead already.

Trish and Asahina had managed to capture Mahiru in their scuffle with the Remnants, Trish trapping her on a softened portion of a roof and Asahina more or less causing her to drown and pass out.

The swimmer had saved her, horrified that she nearly killed someone. "Don't really get it. She killed a piece of shit that deserved it before."

Well, not personally. Asahina had helped though.

"Fugo, calm down." Giorno's voice echoed through the room, causing the two to look back at their boss. Giorno was on a wooden chair, carved by one of the best carpenters in Italy. It was a gift from when he visited Alberobello. He was injured from his fight with Fuyuhiko Kuzuryuu, bruises on his face and blood on his suit. His hands even had some bandages on them, from when Fuyuhiko stomped on them when Giorno was down.

A battle Mista should've been helping with, but he was busy dealing with that bitch with the sword.

Mista patted his stitched up side unconsciously. The girl, Peko from what he was told, had managed to get a few good licks in as well. She almost cut his gut open. It was only thanks to Sex Pistols that he had managed to keep the fight at a manageable distance.

Still, she was skilled with that sword. And her Stand made her already god-like skills with the blade even deadlier. Mista wasn't even sure he could beat her.

It was thanks to Giorno stomping that little Yakuza shit into the ground that the fight had ended, and she took her 'Master' before retreating.

Giorno glared at the woman on the floor and asked, "How many of your members are in my country? So far we've only encountered five of you Remnants."

Mahiru looked up from her position and smiled, showing her bloody teeth. "Wouldn't you like to know?" She then began to chuckle. "Man... that expression on your face... wish I had my camera on me."

Too bad that was gone. Mista stomped on that shit right in front of the girl when she woke up to start the interrogation.

The action seemed to actually get her pissed.

"Answer our fucking questions!" Fugo shouted as he kicked her again across the face. "If you refuse, we'll have to get more creative with how we do this."

"You three do realise that torture is a method that doesn't produce the most trustworthy of answers
right?" Mista glanced at the fifth occupant of the room, Kyoko Kirigiri. The woman had helped out when that mad queen decided to fill in for Fuyuhiko, and it was thanks to her contribution and analytical mind that they had managed to figure out the safe 'range' of Ballroom Blitz.

A few pieces of silverware turned into snakes later, and Sonia had enough poison pumped into her to put down a rhinoceros.

Too bad that other guy, Izuru, dropped in and took her off the playing field. They could've successfully killed one of those punks. Would've done wonders for morale in Italy.

They included her in the room so that there wouldn't be four people doing the interrogation.

"Tch, relax. You haven't seen us do it." Mista said dismissively while Kyoko narrowed her eyes. "We'll have her singing in a bit."

"The ones being tortured will say anything to make the pain stop. That's why torture is unnecessary." Kyoko explained patiently. "I doubt that you have come up with a proven method to make it actually reliable."

"If you want to leave, then do so." Giorno said, causing Mista to blink.

"Hell no man!" Mista protested in annoyance. "The number! Remember the number!"

Fugo gave a sigh. "Mista..."

Why were they acting like he was the bad guy here? If there was only four people, then the odds of Mahiru getting out of her binds and escaping would shoot up!

"No, I'm staying." Kyoko replied while crossing her arms. "She might say something that can give us a lead to where her fellow Remnants are hiding."

Mista nodded before saying, "Well then... we might as well get started."

Fugo smirked as Giorno went to the corner of the room and brought forward a stereo and small Gucci handbag. He tossed the bag over to Mista, while Fugo forced Mahiru to lay face-down on the floor. Mista opened the bag and tossed Fugo a rope, which he tossed over a hook that caught onto it. Fugo then wrapped the rope under Mahiru's jaw, securing it so that Mahiru couldn't move unless she wanted to break her neck. Mista then handed two fishhooks attached to strings, which Fugo tied onto the rope before forcing Mahiru's eyes to open. Fugo then proceeded to take each top eyelid, and had the hook go through the edge. Holding it up, forcing both eyes to stare up.

"Ah! Ah!" Mahiru gasped out in pain, but always stopped herself thanks to the rope.

Mista glanced at Kyoko, who seemed unmoved by the actions they were taking. But Mista could tell from the way she gripped her arms that she wasn't liking any of this.

Well, he couldn't blame her. Torture wasn't exactly something that should be enjoyed.

Mista then handed Fugo the glasses, which he put over Mahiru's eyes.

She was now staring directly at the sole window of the room.
The sunlight was shining directly down, its angle allows Mahiru's body to be completely basked in light.

She was staring at the sun, and the sun was staring back.

And they made absolutely sure that she couldn't look away.

Giorno then put in a cassette in the stereo and pressed play.

It was one of Narancia's favourite songs, some American hip-hop rap shit that had a catchy beat but got annoying due to the fact Narancia played it non-stop.

In moderation though, the thing was great.

"Ahhh!!!!!!" Mahiru screamed out, the glasses amplifying the sun's rays. She would be permanently blinded, given enough time.

The music filled the air, and Mista looked over to Giorno who had begun to dance. Mista and Fugo quickly got to his side and danced with him, their moves nearly perfectly synchronised following the beat of the song.

One might think that they were enjoying this, but the truth was that the dance was a psychological tactic. Narancia came up with it, saying that doing so made the victim of torture realise that they did not care whether he died or not before giving the information. That they were doing this for shits and giggles, and that made them piss themselves and realise answering was the only way they could keep themselves from getting killed. And they would tell the truth from how scared they were. Especially due to how unique the torture is.

"KYAAAAAH!"

...Wait, what?

Mista looked back to Mahiru, and noticed a dark spot forming on her skirt, between her legs. He would assume that it was piss, if not for the scream and the smile on her face.

"Fuck, the rumours were true. They actually get off on this shit." Mista groaned out as they stopped dancing and Giorno stopped the track. "This isn't going to work."

He head the sound of air escaping from nostrils, and he looked back to Kyoko. She seemed a bit paler than before, if that were possible.

Guess seeing that would freak anyone out.

"Indeed. We won't get any answers from her." Giorno glanced over to Mista. "We won't be needing her, in that case."

Mista nodded. "Right, right." Mista walked over to Mahiru and stood in front of her. He took off the glasses. "Could've at least told us what we wanted to know, or made it obvious before we went through all this trouble."

Despite her position, Mahiru smirked. "Where's the fun in that?"
"Freak." Mista stood up and took out his pistol from his waist. "Well, at least you'll be out of our hair."

He aimed the barrel at her forehead and cocked back the hammer...

...He then blinked as he saw a familiar hand on his, lifting it up to the ceiling.

Detective Man's hand, to be precise.

Mista glared at Kyoko, who in the blink of an eye had Purple Haze Feedback grabbing her throat. "The hell do you think you're doing?!" Fugo demanded, to which Kyoko glanced at Mahiru.

"You cannot kill her." Kyoko said calmly despite her position. "She is to come with us, so that the Future Foundation may..."

"Why not?" Giorno demanded coolly, standing in front of Kyoko. "This woman has killed men, women, and children. Performed atrocity after atrocity on the innocent..."

"And proud of it!" Mahiru shouted.

That earned her a kick in the eye from 1. She was lucky it did not kick hard enough to take the eye away permanently.

Giorno didn't even spare her a glance. He kept all his attention on Kyoko. "And you expect me to allow her to live? Harming the innocent is an unforgivable act, and she has performed many. She deserves death."

No kidding. What these Remnants did made Mista sick to his stomach. Anybody with even a sliver of a conscious would want them dead. "Hell, I was going to put a bullet in her sooner or later."

So why should they stop? Why should they let her live?

"You do not get the right to decide who lives and who dies." Kyoko informed Giorno, who merely huffed.

"This is my country. I do not make it a habit to declare executions, but when it comes to scum such as her, they deserve no mercy." Giorno's glare grew deeper. "The Future Foundation has no power here, not yet. In fact, I think they would applaud my actions and only bemoan the fact that they could not do it themse-.."

"Makoto Naegi does not want to kill them, despite all they have done." Kyoko declared, and everyone in the room went silent.

The Ultimate Hope, the one who managed to kill Dio... didn't want to kill his most loyal supporters?

"Any reason why?" Giorno asked, to which Kirigiri glanced at Mahiru before looking back at Giorno.

"He has his reasons, and despite what I may think... he believes with all his heart that they do not deserve death." Her eyes narrowed some more. "That is more than enough reason for me."

Giorno stared at her silently for a few more seconds, most likely contemplating things. There were
three of them and one of Kirigiri. They could easily beat her in a fight if it came to that. But doing so might give Mahiru the chance she needed. The thing that probably stopped her from using her own Stand was because the odds were against her. Take one out, and Mista's righteous fear of the number four would take effect.

Finally, Giorno spoke. "Fugo, release her. Mista, let that woman down and pump her with the necessary drugs to keep her from even having the thought of moving around let alone planning her escape."

"Gio... Boss." Fugo corrected himself before looking at their leader. "You sure?"

"Yes."

That was all that they needed. Giorno had made up his mind, Mista could see that from his eyes and face.

Mista watched as Purple Haze Feedback let Kyoko go, and Detective Man released its grip on him.

"Heh, aww... you pissed that you missed your ch-ACK!" Mahiru shut up when Mista grasped onto the rope and pulled up.

"Shut the hell up already. Despair this and despair that. Come up with some new material." Mista then holstered his cut and took out a small knife to cut the rope.

He was impressed with Kyoko. Most would lose their confidence when getting a face full of Giorno and having one of the most dangerous Stands ready to snap her neck if not release its virus and let it consume her.

"Her resolve... it's pretty damn impressive."

"Inform the men to get prepared." Giorno spoke, his hands gripping into fists and his gaze narrowing. "Tell them to get ready for war."

That was all anyone could say.

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Togami breathed in and out as he clutched his bleeding abdomen, using the wall as support. The bullet had passed through the left side, just below the heart. "Zeppeli could aid me." Togami bit his lip as he drew in shaky breaths. Gold was beside him, feeling his ribs. Togami winced as sharp pain came from certain points. "Yes, they are definitely broken."

Before today, Togami would have been horrified with someone seeing him in this state. Here he was, Byakuya Togami, his clothes dirty and torn bleeding like a stuffed pig with his hair a mess and his glasses missing.

But not now. What use would he have for their opinions?

He looked at the body of the man who put him in this state, Ringo Roadagain. The man was rather
handsome by all accounts. Short, snow-white hair that looked silky and soft. A moustache of the same color and a small patch on the bottom of his lip that looked like a skull. He was skinny and fit, the ideal image of a man. His clothes were pure white in color save for his brown gun holster, a light cap-sleeved jacket with a tall collar, dark gloves revealing his thumbs and index fingers, and a broken wrist-watch.

He was a man who had trapped the four of them by his cabin, making them desperate enough to seatch the residence they had been trying to pass by. He had introduced himself in a humble way before declaring that he wished to duel them to the death.

He would not take no for an answer.

The power of his Stand, Mandom, was frightening. A Stand that manipulated time itself, causing everything to go back by six seconds. He used it to make them constantly go to the wrong path and head back to the cabin, and would continue to do so until they had no choice.

He was serious about his intentions. There was a small graveyard in the back, filled with the bodies of army men and former members of Dio's forces.

But when Naegi tried to convince the man to stop and let them leave...

"If you would kindly step aside..." Ringo motioned to Naegi and Togami. "You two, to the back. I wish to converse with you one at a time."

"Why?" Naegi asked, surprise in his voice. "Please, all I want to do is..."

"I do not seek to negotiate. I have only one desire, with there being no room for compromise." Ringo looked at both of them, utter calmness on his face and not a hint of doubt. "I seek only to converse with those who may stand in a shootout against me."

Johnny and Gyro were silent, but glared at the gunslinger. Naegi was taken aback by the statement, while Togami only felt annoyance bubble up from within him. This man was overestimating not only his skills, but underestimating Togami's as well.

"I can assure you, if you were to face me..." Togami began, only for Ringo to raise his hand.

"You would lose, sir."

Togami's eyes narrowed as Ringo pointed at Johnny and Gyro, more specifically Johnny. "Those two... they have the will necessary to defeat me. You, boy." He looked at Johnny. "You have a Dark Determination to you... You would not hesitate to kill me if the situation called for it." He looked at Gyro. "And you... I am rather impressed. I see the signs of one of the types of people I hate, and yet there is that hunger within you. Same as that boy's. If the situation were to truly come to it, you would not hesitate to kill me either."

Togami looked at the two with a raised eyebrow. Johnny, he could understand. He had been the most vocal towards simply killing the Remnants.

But Gyro? The Itaian fool who made sub-par jokes and stood by Naegi when it came to the Remnants?

Ringo looked back at the two of them. He pointed at Naegi. "You only seek to avoid conflict. I have no doubt that you would only attack if I did so first." He then pointed at Togami: "And you would only strike if I did so against you or your companion."
Ringo shook his head.

"Self defence will not be enough to kill me. Passive observers are not needed here."

The ensuing ‘fights’ ended within a few seconds.

Togami had tried to use Gold in order to break Ringo’s wrist, but the gunslinger rewound time by six seconds and shot him in the leg while Togami had been trying to comprehend what was happening. Naegi then attempted to heal him with his Hope Bullets, while Johnny and Ringo engaged in a shoot-out. Ringo's draw was faster than the Joestar's, who had never been in an actual gun duel before.

He had shot Johnny in the head, causing the American to fall off his horse and onto the ground.

Gyro threw his Steel Ball in a blind rage, and had managed to take the gunslinger's ear clean off before being shot on the left part of his chest. When Gyro had fallen, Naegi had grown furious and attempted to shoot at Ringo with his Hope Bullets.

Was he hoping to make the man see reason? Or was he hoping that his Stand would actually harm the man? Togami could not say.

What it did earn Naegi however was a bullet to the gut.

None of Naegi's Hope Bullets had even remotely changed the man.

Naegi passed out from the shock and Togami was the only one left conscious.

"No..." Togami stared in shock at the scene in front of him. All this carnage, all this pain and death....

It was happening again.

It was all happening again!!

"No... I gave my word as a Togami... never again..."

"Conformist."

Togami looked at Ringo, who was standing up and looking at him with disgust. "You only act in self defence, one of the most basic of survival instincts, and then when you do act you do so out of some misguided ideal to live. One forged by your family." He spat out his next word. "Disgusting. You could never kill me with that."

Togami glared at the man, Gold hovering behind him. How dare he? The Togami family name was a badge of honour! It was an ideal worth living by!

But... he did not act first. Because a Togami never takes the initiative in a battle, be it physically or with wits. Not when there are others around you.
Did that decision, to do as a Togami would, lead to this?

"I have one more bullet, but I only kill those who have the dark intent. The willingness to kill, the ability to live as a True Man." He shook his head. "The bullet would be wasted on either of you."

"Leave my orchard, and never return."

It turned out that, after some thought, Ringo had been correct.

Togami had always lived by being the perfect businessman, to be the perfect... everything. It was how he became the Affluent Prodigy. That willingness to sacrifice anything and everything to reach to the top, to observe a situation and take advantage while keeping yourself clean... those were what a Togami was supposed to be.

Togami lived by that ideal, and connected everything to it.

He never lived for himself.

He never hungered for himself.

Togami made a vow to himself that he would defeat Ringo, not as the Togami Heir... but as Byakuya Togami, another man in this world.

He even left behind his glasses to make this point.

The battle was quick, but brutal. Four shots were fired, with Gold barely protecting him from two while getting a mortal wound on the third. But he made sure Ringo would not win either. Twice he had managed to destroy Ringo's right shoulder with the third knocking off a piece of the ceiling and crushing Ringo's watch, rewinding time a fourth and final time.

Both knew it would be their last.

Togami got the upper hand in that round, and managed to crush Ringo's chest while a bullet lodged itself into Togami's abdomen.

"Welcome to the True Man's World."

Those were Ringo's final words, right after stating his ideals... the ideals of a True Man. A path separate from society... separate from the almost cosmic struggle between Hope and Despair... a True Man's values.

Values that he said Togami was just beginning to embrace, and prayed that he would go down this Path of Light.

"I did not need encouragement from you." Togami informed Ringo's corpse. "I would have found them sooner or later. Byakuya Togami is not beholden to anyone. Not even his own family name."

He would later find Gyro outside, tending to his own wound as well as Johnny and Naegi's. He had faked his death by having a steel ball spin his body head into the ground while stopping his own breathing.

Johnny had tilted his head in just the right angle that the bullet had only grazed his forehead, but the shock made him pass out.
He would simply tell them as well as Naegi when he woke up that he had managed to defeat and kill Ringo. Naegi wasn't happy about that, but he did not press on it.

They would continue on their journey after taking necessities from Ringo's cabin and healing a bit before moving on.

Byakuya Togami would never tell them what had occurred, his talk with Ringo about the True Man's World.

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"No one has records anymore, Kirigiri." Asahina said, sounding more tired than sceptical. "Ultimate Despair destroyed them all."

"Not in Italy." Kirigiri replied. She had read the reports a dozen times over even before she had started this investigation. "Giorno's predecessor in Passione took care to preserve all the records he could. Naples managed to preserve all of them, barring a select few."

"One of those lost ones couldn't be Giorno's?" Asahina was doing her best to work with the investigation, even in the early hours of the morning.

Kirigiri needed someone to defend her, in case she was spotted in the archives rooms of the main building of Passione's Naples Headquarters, formerly the city hall. Detective Man was certainly good for fighting, but it was nothing compared to the raw power of The Ocean for raw combat.

Unfortunately, it meant waking Asahina up and dealing with constant, very distracting, yawns.

As much as she cared for her friend, Naegi was currently in the lead for her choice of living partners.

"Maybe, if it weren't for the fact that there is no one going by the names and descriptions of his parents either." Kirigiri was counting on the idea that Giorno didn't lie about their names. "There is no Giovanna family record anywhere in Italy that matches the description given. Plenty of Giovannis, even now, but no Giovannas."

The Future Foundation had agents in Italy. There were those who, whatever their view of Giorno, didn't believe in being a nation ruled by a criminal gang. Just as there were those in the US who disagreed with Valentine's isolationism. They did their parts, however small, in the fight against Despair.

Kirigiri didn't intend to use them for more than intelligence gathering- Detective Man helping to reveal if they lied or not- but they did help with her efforts. She needed to know if the story Giorno believed in was true or not.

The man wasn't just confusing in the philosophical sense; a criminal that fought for law, but in every sense. There was something about him that both allured and repelled Kirigiri and she intended to discover just who this person was. No matter what he, or anyone else, thought about it.

She was more in control of her desire to uncover the truth than she had been in the past. That didn't
meant the thirst was gone.

*Mitarai wouldn't have agreed to this mission.* Kirigiri had become cynical about the extent to which Mitarai seemed to want a deal done. *He'd disagree with anything that slightly bothers Giorno Giovanna.*

The reasons for Tengan sending her and Asahina with him were now clear. Mitarai was trying too hard to please Giorno. It made him popular in Passione, only Asahina coming close because of her fight alongside Trish Una, but it compromised him as an agent of the Future Foundation.

It made Kirigiri and Asahina look too negative when they were actually on Giorno's side when it came to the internal debates. They wanted to bring him into the fold instead of challenging him. Only Mitarai was undermining this.

Not him alone. Kirigiri wasn't the idealist that Naegi or Asahina were, but she had been more than glad that none of the latter two saw what Giorno had done to the Ultimate Photographer. Forced to stare into the sun while they danced to music, until they realised that Koizumi was enjoying the Despair of being blinded. Just thinking about it sent a chill down her spine.

It was nothing compared to the suspicion she had about Giorno. The hidden truth that had the potential to change everything.

The common enemy of the Remnants of Despair kept the Future Foundation and Passione together. So long as Novoselic was pouring drugs and guns into cities like Venice and Naples, they'd have a common threat.

But what would happen when the Despairs were exiled, or grew bored? Yet why weren't they growing bored? What was driving them to work together the way they were?

All questions that Kirigiri suspected were connected to Giorno Giovanna himself; even if he didn't suspect it.

"There's something else I've been meaning to have the agents follow up on." Kirigiri reached into her pocket and pulled out a picture of Giorno himself. "The birthmarks on his ear. They might give us a clue as to who he is."

Asahina gasped. "You mean he might be pretending to be Giorno Giovanna? How long has that been-"

"We don't know who is listening." Kirigiri needed to be somewhere secure before letting Asahina finish that sentence. "It's unlikely that he's an willing or knowing agent of Despair. He sincerely believes that he is Giorno Giovanna and I doubt he'd have made it this far as a servant of Despair."

"So what're you trying to find out about him?" Asahina asked, eyes filled with curiosity and innocence. Even after all they had been through.

*Something I pray isn't true.* That a Remnant of Despair could have infiltrated one of the few nations that survived the Tragedy. That the predecessor wasn't simply removed in a shadowy coup when he outlived his usefulness. That Passione, and now Mitarai, weren't taken in by a false saviour.

But there were similarities. The vengeful nature, the way that he constantly tried to rise to the top, the inability to be sated with what he had, and even the brutality he showed against his enemies. Giorno
had a sense of justice, or at least showed the illusion of one, but there was a darkness in him.

The cry of Gold Experience was undeniable. Kirigiri only knew of one person who was so fond of the word 'useless'.

The Heir that the Remnants of Despair searched for. Did they know the truth? Was this whole battle simply an illusion to lure the Future Foundation out? Or was Kirigiri simply being paranoid about this?

The Heir to Dio was a story that the Remnants of Despair and those that feared them spread around. The tale of someone who would succeed Dio's legacy and destroy the Future Foundation. Makoto Naegi would be destroyed by the power of the Heir's Stand.

It was fated that he would be the one to achieve his father's dream of domination.

Kirigiri did not believe in fate. What she did believe in was the idea that Dio used his access to the technology of Hope's Peak for his own means. That he would create a fully-grown Heir that would take over where he failed, and could be 'activated' when the time came.

Kirigiri prayed that she was only being too careful, but she had to consider the possibility.

The possibility that Giorno was no more than another Dio Brando.

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"What the hell is wrong with you?" Johnny screamed as he struggled forward. Gyro, despite having working legs, was having trouble holding him back. "Why the fuck won't you hit me back?!"

Johnny Joestar was cold. Johnny Joestar was hungry. Johnny Joestar was hurting all over.

Johnny Joestar was sick of having to deal with Makoto Naegi.

It had been weeks since they set off from Danville and every single day had been a new challenge. From moving through the ardours of nature with what little supplies they had, to dealing with the latest roaming pack of survivors looking for safety, to the fucking Remnants of Despair. For all the campfires and thrill of riding again, there was just too much shit.

It finally came to this. The inevitable outcome. Johnny and Naegi brawling under the night sky in some forest, as a bruised and battered Gyro and Togami were doing their best to keep them apart.

Well, brawl was the wrong word for it. Scrap was better.

Why did Johnny say what he said? Why did he want to make Naegi hit him? Did he just want an excuse to beat up the Ultimate Hope?

*Why shouldn't I get to scream at him? He's the one who won't end the problem.* Johnny pushed the thought down.
Any revenge he wanted had already been taken by now. Naegi may have thrown the first punch, but he stopped fighting about halfway through, while Johnny just laid punch after punch on him. Naegi's nose was bleeding and the only thing stopping him from summoning Livin' On A Prayer was that he needed to feel Hope first.

Who could feel Hope after listening to Johnny complain and scream?

The Remnants of Despair were monsters, who desecrated the memory of his brother, but they were right about him. Johnny wasn't even a zero. He was less than zero. A piece of shit who treated the people who deserved better like garbage, and still spat venom at everyone around him.

But Naegi shared some of the blame! The way he treated Johnny as if he was made of glass, looking at his legs with the pity nearly everyone else did, and pretending he wasn't bothered by Johnny's attitude. Letting the Remnants run away every time because he thought they were forced into this life, even as they had a body-count larger than genocidal dictators.

He even warned Akane when Johnny had the perfect shot! He spent so much time trying to save her when they were attacked by Civil War! How did she repay him? By telling him that she was going to hurt him- and he acted like that was a sign that she wasn't an insane murderer!

He looks at your legs because you shoved splinters into them so you could ride again. He doesn't say anything because he thinks you'd bitch back. He's the Ultimate Hope; he's a better person than you. His mind whispered those treacherous words and they somehow made him angrier.

How did he survive so long? Naegi didn't have a harsh bone in his goddamn body. He was too nice to everyone. Too willing to give away rather than keep himself safe. As if there weren't people around him who needed him to be selfish once in a while.

Naegi really was like Jonathan.

"You want me to say it again? Fine! You get off on this! You like to go around and play the Messiah while we all jump in the way! It's safe because no one will let you get hurt! You can bask in all the glory while we just suffer." Johnny screamed the words louder than he had before. Naegi still did nothing. "Your friends died because of you!"

"Johnny, that's enough." Gyro said. Not like how he said it before; this time there was no fire. Just sadness.

"Come on! You know you want to do it. I'm the guy who keeps making you turn away from the scavengers. I'm the guy who keeps telling you to kill the Remnants of Despair." Johnny fought to keep his voice steady. The cold was making his voice shake. "I just insulted your goddamn friends!"

The stress of it all finally got to Johnny, after Naegi revealed the truth about California. That the odds of the treatment even working was less than a fraction of a percent. That made Johnny say what he did about Naegi's friends.

He finally learnt what made Naegi throw a punch then. Right at the left cheek.

"It's because of my legs, right? You don't want to hit a cripple?" Johnny struggled against Gyro's grip, but it was useless. "That's it. You pity me. Why wouldn't you? The great and mighty Jorge
Joestar brought down to earth. Forced to wallow in his own shit! He's not even zero. He's less than that! He's the shitty Joestar brother who ruins everything he touches."

Naegi tried to say something, but it came out as a mumble. Probably because Johnny had punched his cheek a couple times as well. How many times had Naegi actually hit him? Once? Twice? Far less than Johnny had hit Naegi.

Johnny glared and fought against Gyro's hold. Not like Naegi who was now getting his injuries checked by Togami, despite the taller man's own injuries from that fight with Ringo. The Ultimate Hope simply laid there and accepted the treatment.

Why? Why wasn't he doing anything? Why was he just staring at Johnny with those eyes, like he was some pitiful kid who was crying?

It was just the cold getting to him!

"Well I can move now! I know the Spin. So get the hell up and start fighting." Johnny said. Naegi refused to even move. "Don't you get mad?! Where was the fire before? You didn't hug Dio to death. So come on! Hit me! Fight back...show me that it's not just me...that it's not just me who fucks up..."

No one moved. Gyro wasn't even trying to hold him back anymore.

Naegi looked at him with those same concerned eyes that he saw all those years ago. The lack of anger in them only made him more furious. "Johnny-"

"Shut up, Jonathan!" Johnny couldn't stop himself in time. All he could do was sit there in shock.

Everyone else tensed and sat there in silence. The fireplace crackled and roared as the only noise around. Not even Togami was composed enough to give Johnny one of those dismissive glares he always liked to give.

Johnny ruined everything again.

Who knew how long the four of them sat there in silence, beyond the sound of the fire? All Johnny knew was that it was broken by a sharp bird's cry in the distance. It was followed by half a dozen faint growls just west of where they made camp.

They spent enough time dealing with Tanaka to know what animal those growls belonged to.

Wolves.

"It's the Remnants. They've found us. I'll hold them off." Togami was already herding Naegi towards Journey and Gyro had moved from holding Johnny to packing up their things.

"In your condition?" Gyro grinned, showing his yellow teeth to Togami's obvious displeasure. "I can see why you'd rather face those guys, instead of trying your luck on the road again." No one laughed, not even if things weren't fucked. "Cause of what happened with-"

"Yes, I heard you." Togami replied. The heir tried to lift Naegi up before wincing. A sharp intake of breathe and Naegi whispered something to him. Livin' On A Prayer emerged and the ahoge was glowing and humming, all to heal Togami's remaining injuries.
"Good. So you know that you wouldn’t get much gone. You go with Naegi and Johnny. We’ve got a head-start on them. I know how to make it bigger.” Gyro threw the bags towards Johnny, who caught them, and moved towards Valkyrie.

Johnny had already started moving towards Slow Dancer, but even he couldn't stop himself from gasping. Gyro had been open about why he came to them, just last week. He was told by his boss in Italy to find out what kind of man Makoto Naegi was. That was it. He didn't need to risk himself for them.

Not everyone's selfish like you. Johnny swallowed down the self-loathing and only stared at Gyro.

"Don't die." He demanded.

"Nyohoho~. Who'd you think you're talking to? Killing a Zeppeli is harder than it looks." Gyro smiled and went on Valkyrie.

It didn't take long for them to pack up their things and get moving. Naegi's injuries were already healing thanks to his Stand, probably inspired by how he helped Togami, and Johnny was still the same rider he was long ago. Journey, Spandau, and Slow Dancer all raced eastwards where they’d find a way out of the forest.

Gyro would be fine. The trees were dense and he knew the way to go. Ball Breaker was more than enough to handle the Remnants- who weren't as smart as him- and Tanaka was probably a scout. That was how they caught up so quickly.

So why was Johnny looking back every few seconds? Why did his body flinch whenever he heard the sounds of battle behind him?

He was getting himself worried over nothing. It didn't help that, every time he turned his head back, he could see Naegi sadly looking at Johnny. He recognised the look in those eyes. It was the same look he refused to see when he last spoke to his brother.

Pity and regret.

Great job, Johnny. You even make the Ultimate Hope feel like shit.

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"Enough screwing around." Fuyuhiko slapped the Ultimate Detective, the harlot that dared challenge Lord Dio, and the sound echoed through the air. Mikan didn’t mind that her cheek stung and reddened from the blow. With a firm grip on her hair, he pulled her close enough that their noses were touching. "Where's Giorno Giovanna?"

Mikan Tsumiki couldn't contain her excitement. This was it. This was the day that the Remnants of Despair would be remnants no more. Lord Dio's Heir would restore them to Ultimate Despair and they would be at their rightful place. Servants to the will of Dio Brando.

The truth that the detective loved so much had only strengthened Despair.
The Heir. Giorno Giovanna was the Heir. Kamukura had revealed it to them. He handed them the documents detailing Project Haruno and the fruits of Lord Dio's decision to use it for his own needs. It was obvious. Only someone like Lord Dio could have thrived in The World's End. It only makes sense that his son would rule a place like this.

Kyoko Kirigiri being found had been a happy coincidence. She had been investigating something when Peko had spotted her and Fuyuhiko's pet sword ran back to tell the others. Setting up the trap for the detective was easy enough, and now here she was.

The dreams that Mikan had of slowly destroying those who had murdered Lord Dio was coming true.

"Master. We will be detected soon." Peko said, whilst on one knee before him. "The Heir may be hiding in Sen-"

Fuyuhiko's back-hand was just as strong as his palm; sending Peko stumbling half-way across the cellar that they were hiding in. "Don't disrespect Lord Dio's son! We're probably already in the shit for that crap I told him about being a boss of criminals! The Heir doesn't hide! He's probably asleep right now."

It was adorable to imagine little Giorno sleeping away, tucked in bed, but Mikan had other things to worry about. They had agreed to carry out this operation in Rome quietly and that meant being subtle. A rarity for the group.

"Fuyuhiko, you there? Got good news and bad news." Sonia's voice crackled through the radio. "Good news is that Kamukura's heading to the Palace." The Queen then swore under her breath. "Bad news is that some piece of shit in an orange suit is heading my way."

The Ultimate Yakuza growled to himself. "Is Swim-Bitch with him? If not, lure him away. We don't need to kill the Heir's underlings. Ultimate Despair's going to need all the people it can get."

"You're fools..." Kirigiri groaned out. It was hard for her to speak after having the wind knocked out of her by Beat It. "He'll never agree to join you. He won't-"

Mikan chomped down her own tongue and smiled as Kirigiri groaned from the pain. Fuyuhiko chuckled as he withdrew Beat It, the Stand looking so much like him except for the bright red leather jacket it wore and the massive cigar it constantly smoked. The blood dribbling down Kirigiri's mouth was more than enough reward for him.

But not for Mikan. The bitch deserved worse at the hands of Voodoo.

"You go," She said, voice wobbling. "I'll deal with her."

Fuyuhiko nodded and left the room, Peko trailing behind him. They would have never agreed to something like this if they didn't think it meant seeing Giorno first. The head of the Kuzuryu Gang needed to pay respect and beg forgiveness for the things he said to Giorno last week. Back when he didn't know the truth.

Mikan could accept that. She'd have all the time in the world to be there for Giorno.

Right now? Now was the time that she'd spend avenging Lord Dio's honour. If Kirigiri had simply
kept her mouth shut, or listened to Murralsee, then she'd have never challenged Lord Dio. Makoto Naegi would have never touched the Stand Arrow and her beloved would still be with her now.

*I'll punish her for you, Lord Dio. She will know Despair.* Mikan closed her eyes and began stroking the charm she wore around her neck. The last part of her beloved that she'd managed to save. The place where Giorno's siblings were kept safe. *That's what a mother does. She protects the family.*

It had been so easy to pluck a hair from Kirigiri's head and place it inside the straw body of Voodoo. So was spitting inside the doll and closing it up, completing the spell that her Stand needed to reverse the fates of Mikan and Kirigiri. To provide the Ultimate Nurse with the opportunity to break Kirigiri as her gift to Giorno.

She looked to Kirigiri and-

*Where did she go?* Mikan blinked and, nope, Kirigiri was gone. Where she had been lying, hands tied behind her back, there was now an empty space.

Mikan had to force herself to breathe slowly. She couldn't panic or get mad. Just let the Despair flow in and out of her body, but also keep a steady mind. Kirigiri was still under the power of Voodoo. She would always be under the power of Voodoo.

No one ever escaped. They all thought they could run away, but they never could. No one ever realised what was happening to them until Mikan would slice her throat open.

All she had to do was kick the wall really hard and Kirigiri's cries of pain would tell Mikan where to go. Let the other Remnants of Despair plunge Rome into chaos. *She would be busy avenging Lord Dio himself by torturing the Ultimate Detective herself.*

*Don't worry, Giorno. Your Mama is going to make all this better.* Mikan giggled to herself at the thought of being the mother Giorno needed.

He was only fifteen. Basically a child. She could just imagine him holding her close when the days as this world's new master grew too stressful. She'd protect him from the bad people that wanted to hurt him in the name of a dead world. Makoto Naegi wouldn't take this one away from her.

But first she needed to find Kirigiri and make her know exactly what Despair was. Voodoo was the perfect Stand for Mikan. She could decide who was healed and who was hurt. No one would ever think of her as useless, or think they couldn't depend on her.

Yes. With Voodoo, she'd be the perfect mother for Giorno.

Mikan turned and ran towards the wall on the other side of the cellar and threw her knee against the hard stone. She felt nothing as the bone slammed against the wall and smiled when she heard a sharp gasp of pain just right of the open door.

The hunt was on.
"So this is Jonathan's little brother..." Komaeda tilted his head, as if observing an animal, before sighing to himself. "I guess even exposure to the Ultimate Hope wouldn't be enough for a failed Ultimate like you."

Johnny might have said something back at the skinny shithead who insulted him, on any other day, and at any other time. He wasn't going to take that kind of crap from a Remnant of Despair.

But what could he do?

Togami was lying face-first on the ground and the blood was pouring out of his body. Gold's once-shining form had been replaced with a stained puddle that barely took a form now that its user was unconscious. There was an indent in the ground where its former solid form had been smashed down on.

Nidai's laugh boomed across the valley as he looked down at what he did to the Ultimate Progeny. You're The Best's pylons stuck out from his shoulders and still had a large electric current between the two. He raised a hand and slammed it down on Owari's back, making her jerk forward.

That made the girl cry even more. It was like she was completely different from how she was with Togami. There she had been all fire and fury when she threw all those punches at Gold. The flames of Eye Of The Tiger were roaring all around her; enough to melt Gold's skin.

Now? Now she was just laying there crying about how the 'fun' was over.

It wasn't even like how she cried with Civil War. This was nothing more than her basking in Despair, instead of what could have been genuine remorse back then.

Johnny kept Naegi and Journey behind him and Slow Dancer. He couldn't let the Remnants get anywhere near him, even if they had been fighting just last night. It wasn't just the hours of riding non-stop that taught him about priorities.

It may have been possible for him to get a hit on Komaeda, thanks to that goddamn Stand of his, but Johnny's focus was on something else entirely.

Gyro's back was covered in red scars that looked like it was, and probably was, from tendrils rather than a human or the ground itself. Tanaka held him up with only a single hand wrapped around his neck. It was disgusting how Gyro was being used as some kind of trophy.

There were just too many of them. Togami told Naegi to stay back, but the kid tried to use Livin' On A Prayer when he could, only for the Remnants to intercept.

Komaeda, the kid hanging by his leg, Nidai, and Owari had all been waiting for them. Tanaka's little animal cries were all just ways to get the four of them out of the forest and move towards this little trap.

By the time they had suspected something, Owari already drop-kicked Togami off Spandeu and claimed him as an opponent. Komaeda got to toy with Johnny instead, while that creepy kid-Monaca something- just sat and watched with a bored look.

Johnny had prayed that Gyro would come and help them out; and was crushed to see Tanaka riding a reluctant Valkyrie with Gyro's prone body in hand.
Gyro wasn't prone anymore. He was convulsing. What the hell did Tanaka do to him?

"The box jellyfish is one of the most poisonous animals in the world. It's almost transparent in the ocean and its stings must be treated immediately if the victim is to survive." Tanaka recited, eyes boring into Johnny's skull. "That is at its average size. I assure you, Jorge, that Gyro Zepelii has received far more than that."

"What do you even want?!!" Johnny howled. The rage took over again. "You all just go around killing people! For what?! For Dio? He's been dead for months! For Jonathan? He'd never want this! Is it me? Was this all just to bring me out here and turn me into the new Jojo?" Johnny tightened his grip on Slow Dancer's reins, feeling the leather dig into his palms. "That's what you want. The cook can joke, those two can bitch about my throwing-aim, and you can make up all the fantasy-shit you want, but the guitar-girl was right. You all want me to be Jojo."

"Everyone else had lost faith, apart from myself." Tanaka shook his head. Like Johnny was the one who did him wrong. "I see now that I was mistaken. You are no Jojo."

"Jonathan wouldn't have let his crippling drown him in Despair. He really was a once-in-a-lifetime soul." Komaeda turned his head away from Johnny and he smiled. It made Johnny want to throw up. "Until you, Makoto Naegi. We're going to have so much fun together. Aren't we, Monaca?"

"You killed Dio, didn't you?" Monaca hadn't changed from that apathetic look on her face until now. Her smile showed every last set of her teeth, like a carnivore stalking its prey. "A lot of fun."

"What are you talking about? He's not going with you." Johnny readied Tusk Act 3. He could hold them off.

It was only a couple more miles to the nearest city. It wasn't like the other settlements and towns they had been too. This one was protected what the remains of the US military and had communications with the whole world. Naegi could flee there and he'd be safe for more than long enough for either the government or the Future Foundation to send help, or evac him.

All it'd need from Naegi was for him to ride Journey like he never rode it before, and to leave the others behind. Johnny could hold off the Despairs for longer, if he made them choose between him or Naegi, or even fight them off while trailing Naegi. Make them fight for every inch.

But then he'd let Gyro die. He had heard of box jellyfish and he knew that their poison was deadly. Johnny could at least save himself if he tried hard enough, but there was no way that he could cover Naegi, save himself, and keep Togami and Gyro alive.

What choice did he have? The Remnants wouldn't kill Naegi, once they had him. Maybe when they were done with him, but it'd a long time before they'd be finished with their work on him. They'd turn him into nothing more than a broken husk.

Gyro started choking again, blood seeped down from what was probably his mouth and dripped from Tanaka's grip. All Johnny had to do was let the man before him die having fought to save them.

The man who believed in his will to walk again, who taught him the secrets of Spin, and who had fought by Johnny's side these past few weeks. They had rode together, eaten together, and had grown together. If it wasn't for Gyro, Johnny wondered if he'd still be the same punk he'd been in Kentucky.
He couldn't leave Gyro. He just couldn't.

Tanaka looked at Johnny, his face probably in some kind of despair, and scoffed. His free hand went to his pocket and pulled out a vial of orange liquid.

"There is no Despair in tormenting you, Lesser Joestar." He said, the tiny glass shining under the morning sun. "I had this potion concocted in one of our many dark fortresses, in a dark bargain with a witch who could cast away her wounds before they happened."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Johnny asked. Tanaka turned to Naegi and raised his voice.

"Makoto Naegi. You will hand yourself over to us, or Gyro Zepelli dies this minute." Tanaka shifted his eyes towards Togami's body. "Rest assured, Byakuya Togami will die painfully as well. His many heresies against Lord Dio have not gone unnoticed."

Johnny knew what this meant. They were using Gyro and Togami against Naegi. They knew he'd never forgive himself if they died for him, just like Johnny couldn't forgive himself if Gyro died because he left him there.

But was it worth letting them have the Ultimate Hope? Johnny would have his friend back, but the entire world would be made to watch as Naegi would be tortured to death. As the Remnants of Despair broke him.

Did it make him evil that he considered the offer for a moment? It was ridiculous. Naegi wasn't so stupid as to-

"Okay then." Naegi's voice was unsteady. He could barely get the words out. "I just have to hand myself over to you, right? Then you'll let them go? All of them?"

"We'll have what we came for." Tanaka replied.

"I have one more condition." Naegi said, which made Owari and Nidai growl at him. He didn't flinch. "When this is done; show proof that Jonathan didn't know about any of this. Show that he didn't join Ultimate Despair."

The Remnants of Despair were silent. Johnny swore he saw something flash in Tanaka's eyes.

"Fine." He said, before motioning an arm at Naegi. "Well? Come. The fate you deserve awaits you."

Journey whined as its rider undid himself, and Johnny leaned over towards him. "Naegi, what the hell?" He hissed. He didn't know if it was anger or fear that made his voice so violent. "You know what they'll do to you?"

He had to know. Maybe that was why he was doing it. Try to exploit their insanity and escape.

*He has a plan.* Johnny's mind whispered.

It made sense. Naegi wasn't an idiot. He was one of the people who had killed Dio Brando. The way his eyes were shaking...it was just a bluff.

How else could he have been smiling like that?
"Don't worry. I have a plan. Can't say it yet." Naegi's voice shook. He was committed to the bluff. "Johnny, make sure Journey gets well-fed. You and Gyro were right. I kind of spoiled him. I'm sorry I treated you the way I did. Like you were just extra-luggage or a weak child. Maybe if I treated you like I'd treat me if I was like that..."

"Just don't die." Johnny spat the words out and slammed a hand on Naegi's shoulder. "Whatever you do, don't let them destroy you."

Naegi was allowed to use Livin' On A Prayer on Togami to heal his wounds and keep him alive. Johnny had the feeling that the Remnants wanted his death to be a lot slower, when the time came. Johnny got to make sure that Tanaka applied the cure for the poison, while he rubbed soothing cream on Gyro's injuries. It wasn't the best stuff, but it'd do for now.

Johnny last saw Naegi walking behind the rest of the Remnants of Despair, with Komaeda and Monaca just ahead of him, and gritted his teeth. He should have done more for the kid. He should be trying to rescue him, not seeing him off and worrying about what those two were whispering to him.

He knows what he's doing. Johnny wondered if he was just bullshitting himself. If he really was just making up an excuse for being a coward. But no. Naegi wouldn't have just thrown away everyone's sacrifices until now. He's into that Hope stuff. He knows what'll happen if they kill him. There's gotta be a plan.

Togami, Gyro, and even Johnny until last night had told him that he was too important to risk. That everyone came down to him and that he had to make his safety the priority. Naegi never liked it, but he hadn't just sacrificed himself for that, did he?

No. It was impossible. Even if he did, all Johnny had to do was just wait for Gyro and Togami to wake up and they'd plan a way to get Naegi back.

So why did Johnny feel like such a coward?

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"What did you just say?" Giorno couldn't believe what he was hearing.

This was simply a dream. Izuru Kamukura was not in his bedroom right now and he was not telling Giorno such horrific lies.

He'd wake up and he'd go for more rounds of talks with Kirigiri and Mitarai about the concessions the Future Foundation could make to him. The concessions they could make to Italy.

He wouldn't let himself get filled with doubt by Kirigiri's questions about what he truly desired. All he wanted was for Italy to be safe and stable, Passione to reclaim its former glory, and to become the Gang-Star he knew he could be.

Yet if he became Emperor, he could rule both Passione and Italy. The Future Foundation would have to meet him on his terms. Only, did he truly want the crown?

There were few people he trusted- Izuru Kamukura definitely not one of them-and all of them would
have told him that he deserved the power. They believed in him and believed that he was righteous. Trish, Mista, Fugo, and Sheila all believed in the dream that he and Bruno shared.

Mitarai believed in him too. It was a child's innocence in how Mitarai saw Giorno as the world's great hope. Surely, if he believed Giorno should become Emperor...

*The Future Foundation isn't him though. It's men and women who want to take all of this away from us.* Giorno, even now, couldn't stop the anger from bubbling inside him. *Bruno, Narancia, Abbachcio. What did they die for? So that some Hope's Peak graduate can decide the fate of the world?*

He could go it alone. He was even ready to; before Kirigiri pointed out a question he hadn't considered. The question of when he would stop feeling like there was something else for him to take.

The threat of the Remnants of Despair helped keep him and the Future Foundation tied together as well.

But this? What he was hearing now? Even as Rome was slowly slipping into chaos?

Giorno wondered if this was what Kirigiri was investigating, when she thought he didn't know what she was doing. The secret that she kept from him.

"You, Giorno Giovanna, are the son of Dio Brando; the deceased Ultimate Master and former lord of Ultimate Despair." Kamukura said, standing on the balcony ledge just outside the window of Giorno's room. "You never wondered why the memory of your parents felt strange to you? How you ended up on the streets of Naples, mistreated by them, yet filled with rage and ambition? None of the signs of an abusive life that weren't beneficial for a leader?"

"Why should I believe you?" Giorno asked, ignoring the voices in his mind that agreed with Kamukura.

"There is no reason to, other than the fact that I gain nothing from lying. Dio did not care for me, fearing my Stand's power," Behind Kamukura was a being made entirely from cracked glass. "The Remnants of Despair know the truth and they will want you to become their new leader. The Heir to Dio Brando."

"That's insane. I would never-"

"Why not? It is your legacy." Kamukura reached behind his back and threw a stack of papers onto the floor between the window and Giorno's bed. Lord, he was still in his bed. "Project Haruno. In case the Hope Cultivation Plan ever needed a back-up. Someone easier to control. Lacking every single Talent, yes, but physically and mentally capable of being an inspiring figure. Dio hijacked it to create a clone of himself and another."

Giorno left his bed, keeping a very close eye on Kamukura in case he tried something, and picked up the documents. There was the Hope's Peak logo.

What followed was one of the worst moments in Giorno's life.

*Everything I am. Everything I wanted to be.* Giorno remembered the voice in his dreams, telling him to rise to the top by any means necessary. It hadn't been his drive; it had been the voice of his father.
It was all decided for me. My Fate, and my very being. First by Hope's Peak, then by my father. No wonder Ultimate Despair search for me. They see me as another Dio.

Giorno had always believed in the importance of choice. If someone even wished to destroy themselves, directly or indirectly, then they had the right to make that choice, so long as no others were harmed by it. That was what he believed.

Was he wrong? How could he believe in choice if he had none in his own fate?

Did the Future Foundation know about this? Their leadership were once high and middle-rankning members of Hope's Peak. Surely one of them had to know, and never told him.

Yes, they had to have known. This was why they sent their representatives. An assumption that a pet, even one hijacked by Dio, would do as it was told. That he'd simply bow and do as he was told.

This wasn't fair. What had Giorno's friends died for, if his fate was already decided for him? He was no more than the heir to the legacy of Dio Brando? He was created for the sole purpose of fulfilling the machinations of another.

He was no better than Izuru Kamukura himself.

"You will be the one to choose." Kamukura said. Giorno scoffed at the joke. "Will you side with the Future Foundation or Ultimate Despair? Are you a protector or a ruler? The power of Gold Experience Requiem will decide the fate of this world."

In the blink of an eye, Kamukura vanished and Giorno was left alone in his room once more. The sounds of battle raged outside. It was probably what remained of the Novosleic Special Ops unit, fighting alongside their masters in the Remnants of Despair. It wasn't the anarchy that the Remnants normally brought, but Giorno would stop it regardless.

His friends were out there and needed help. Whatever else, he was still the ruler of this land and had to protect it.

What then? There's no going back from what we just learnt. Giorno turned his head the only other resident of this room.

Mr. President had more power over his fate than Giorno did. Born from the ambitions of old men in a hurry, and given new purpose by the fallen Ultimate Master, Giorno was more a homunculus than a person. Nothing more than a vessel for the dreams of others.

Why had his father sent him to Italy? Why did he not tell his minions about the identity of his Heir? He likely never expected to die at Hope's Peak, only he still did nothing to guarantee that Giorno would follow the path he did. The path of dominating Italy.

Why did he give me the past he did? No money or support? Did Giorno's father want him to have a life of suffering, so that he'd be easier to control? Only Dio had a reputation for being a free spirit. Just what was his father thinking? Was he a son in Dio's eyes, or simply another tool.

The bedroom door slammed open and Mista ran inside with his pistol at the ready. He was fully-clothed and here Giorno was in silk sleep-wear.

"Giorno, it's those Despair shit-bags! They're in Rome." Mista scanned the room, including Mr.
President, and ran up to the drawer to throw clothes towards Giorno. The Gang-Star caught them and began to change. "They're quiet, but they've already started killing people. Kirigiri and Fugo are barely holding some of them off."

"How many are there?" He asked, already out of his pyjamas and into his clothes.

"All of them! The ones in Italy, I mean. They're all in Rome." Mista replied. "They were smart. They did it away from the Palace. I only heard about it while Mitarai was asking to talk to you in private. We can't let them do this!"

Giorno knew that his bodyguard was right. They couldn't allow the Remnants of Despair to do this, even if they were willing to serve him.

His mind went to what Mista was talking about. What did Mitarai want to speak to him about? Did he know something about Project Haruno? He might have known some dark secrets about the Future Foundation, or simply wished to talk as a friend.

Giorno couldn't see him like this. Not when he was so full of anger and doubt.

Mista he could talk to. The two of them were about to rescue Rome yet again from a cruel fate; once against an egocentric tyrant and now against a band of terrorists killing in his own name.

"They've come to finish this. They've found what they're looking for." Giorno said, choosing not to reveal the truth to Mista. They didn't have time. "If they're killing people right now, it means they don't know the exact location. Has the Senate been evacuated?"

"Yeah. Wait. What are you-"

"Mitarai and I are heading for the Senate. I'm taking Mr. President with me." Mista was needed elsewhere. Giorno had a feeling that the Remnants wouldn't continue their destruction for long, if they noticed him moving.

Mista clearly had his doubts. "I can't just let you go alone! I'm supposed to-"

"I won't be hurt, Mista." Giorno looked at his friend. "I need you to do this." He chuckled. "Besides, if you came with us, we'd be a group of four."

That managed to make Mista amenable to accepting Giorno's decision. A bodyguard that wasn't afraid to question his leader; just what Giorno wanted from Mista. Complete loyalty was the other thing he wanted and he got that as well. The only concession he made was only separating from Mista when they left the building.

Giorno could make this all stop. With but a single word, he would be the lord and master of the Remnants of Despair. Novoselic would do whatever he commanded. The Kuzuryu Gang would be a mere side-arm of Passione. Thousands of cells across the world would answer to him.

All it needed was for him to make himself the leader of the greatest evil the world had ever known.

He'd be in the company of those like Sonia Nevermind and Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu. The Queen of Novoselic who mocked the idea of a leader owing anything to their followers, and butchered them whenever she could. The head of the Kuzuryu Gang who slaughtered his family and engaged in every criminal activity he could. The one who spat on Giorno's dream of being a Gang-Star.
They caused the deaths of millions. All for a legacy that he was destined to inherit. Giorno fought to take Passione and was in the position to take control of Europe, if he so chose.

Would it be his rule? Would it not just be the rule of Dio Brando's son? Giorno's thirst for power could easily just be a path towards becoming a monster like the Remnants of Despair.

Unless he used that power for good. Use the Remnants to eliminate his enemies, then destroy them, and create a world of peace. Is that not Hope? Giorno simply had to choose between accepting his legacy, or fighting it.

But for someone like him. Did they really have a choice?

Giorno didn't want to think of such things. Instead, he focused on reaching Mitarai, getting him and Mr. President to the Senate, and waiting for the Remnants to come to him.

If he was in control of at least one thing, it would be punishing these bastards for trying to undermine his country.

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Stand Stats

**Adam's Apple**

User: Teruteru Hanamura

**Stats**

- Destructive Power: C
- Speed: B
- Range: A
- Durability: E
- Precision: B
- Developmental Potential: C

**Abilities**

Stand is activated when the user 'prepares' food. Can manipulate nutritional value, caloric intake, heat, and other properties of that food. Cannot change size of food, nor revert it to the state prior to 'preparation' and further changes cannot be made after someone else touches the food.

**Into The Lens**

User: Mahiru Koizumi

**Stats**

- Destructive Power: B
- Speed: A
- Range: E
- Durability: C
- Precision: B
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**
Stand resides inside a camera held by the user. Can transfer between cameras, but otherwise cannot be activated unless in a camera or any other medium capable of taking photographs.

User can teleport to areas that they have taken photographs of; provided they have the photograph in question.

When taking a photograph, the user can 'add features' that can emerge in the real world, using a drawing implement. These do not have a physical effect, but those who touch them will see the features otherwise interact with them i.e. adding flames, if the target touches them, will see the flames spread to the target's body, and may even feel the sensations. This effect only applies for the area where the photograph was taken, and can only be used once at a time.

If the user takes a photograph and the target is looking directly at the flash, the target is sent into the world of the photograph- a realm that looks exactly like the real world, but in monochrome. User can manipulate the photo to follow the targets, even if they move outside the area photographed, and can manipulate the world of the photograph by adding 'features'. In the world of the photograph, a monochrome copy of the user resides and hides. This is the true form of Into The Lens. Escape requires defeating this form, destruction of the photograph or camera, or the user's own desire to free the target. Defeating the form will destroy the camera.

**Land of Confusion**

**User: Sagishi**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: B
- Range: C
- Durability: C
- Precision: A
- Developmental Potential: A

**Abilities**

User eliminates the ability of to be recognised by those around them. They can be heard, seen, and smelt by another but will not be seen as an independent being but more an inconsequential part of the scenery. Effect is broken when the user is interacted with, whether by touch or taste, but also if the user initiates intentional verbal or physical contact with another. Inability to recognise user does not extend to items or weapons in the user's possessions and targets will perceive those items as existing i.e. user using a gun will not be recognised when Stand is active, but target will know that they have a gun aimed at them.

**Safety Dance**

**User: Hiyoko Saionji**

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: C
- Speed: C
- Range: C
- Durability: D
- Precision: B
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**

Stand activates when the user begins to dance and begins to play music; the type of which changes
depending on the nature of the user's dance. Those who see the user dancing, or hear the noise emitted by Safety Dance, are compelled to dance with the user until either the noise stops or the user stops dancing. Targets who have Stands will have the Stands dance as well and, even if otherwise too far to be affected, will dance if the Stand is affected by Safety Dance. Targets and Stands can use abilities, so long as they do not interfere with dancing.

The user cannot be directly harmed by those dancing and cannot be exhausted by their dance while Safety Dance plays its music. However, effect cannot be re-applied for sixty seconds, if the user stops dancing or a target is broken out of the spell. Targets affected are able to dance even if they are otherwise incapable of doing so i.e. disability or poor co-ordination.

**You're The Best**

**User: Nekomaru Nidai**

**Stats**

- Destructive Power: B
- Speed: B
- Range: C
- Durability: C
- Precision: B
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**

User is capable of generating own electricity and manipulate it for offensive and defensive purposes at a range of 5m.

User can extend range to 20m in terms of affecting the bodies those around him. Can enhance physical and mental attributes, so long as the target remains within range, or trigger muscle reflexes and bodily functions to either assist or sabotage those around him i.e. have someone strike an opponent behind them that they did not notice or make someone trip on their own feet.
Here's the new Bonus Features to tide you all until Hope's Blood gets going. Some of these were suggested by readers and I personally thought were great. Enjoy!

**Bonus Features 3**

**Josuke Hair Insults**

Mitarai: "A delinquent! Stay back! I'm warning you."

Izuru: "That hair-style...Worthless."

Komaeda: "Ah! I get it! You're using that hair to feel the despair of everyone laughing at you. Smart thinking. Get the little misfortunes so it adds up to a big amount of good luck later!"

Chiaki: "That pompadour is Final Boss-tier bad hair!"

Pekoyama: "To remove that hair-style...I must draw my blade."

Tsumiki: "That hair...it must mean that you're a...I'm sorry! Please don't mug me or steal my clothes!"

Saionji: "You know what would make that hair really cool? Fire ants!"

Koizumi: "Get rid of that hair! I just want to take pictures that makes people smile, not laugh from embarrassment!"

Sagishi: "...I don't have the right wig to imitate that."

Nidai: "HAHA! I like it! Have ridiculous hair to lure the opponent into a false sense of security! You'd make a great MMA fighter, if that hair wasn't a giant target!"

Hanamura: "If only you had a cultured set of hair like me! I can show you the proper way to use conditioner, among other things..."

Yukizome: "That hair-style can only mean one thing! Delinquent! Get back to class, you rotten orange!"

Juzo: "You realise I have to beat the shit out of you now, right? That hair's literally asking for it."

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**Unused Stands**

*Sound of Silence (Boulevard of Broken Dreams 'Requiem')*
User: Izuru Kamukura

Stats
Destructive Power: N/A
Speed: N/A
Range: N/A
Durability: N/A
Precision: N/A
Developmental Potential: E

Abilities
Boulevard of Broken Dreams breaks into fragments of self, form is that of multiple glass shards which can be used for combat and defensive purposes. Breaking these shards will not harm the user.

Any Stand, once using its abilities in the user's eyesight or caught by the reflections of the Stand, will have its abilities mimicked and can be used whenever the user wishes. Each shard can become a Stand copy which, due to their number, means that the user is capable of using multiple 'Stands' at once.

Unused Stand Appearances

Rainbow In The Dark: Stand looks exactly like Holy Diver but its skin is shining bright blue instead of purplish-black.

Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now: A UFO which continues hundreds of miniature versions of We Built This City that deploy and act to defend Komaru and those close to her.

Nirvana Act 3/4: Act 3 has the metallic coils extend and wrap around body and limbs, also forms a face mask that covers all but eyes which have Act 1-style scouters. Act 4 is a full battle-suit that envelops the entire body and parts are retracted according to the user's will.

EoH Team-Up

Dio/Mitarai: "Ryota, our Talents combined will be what takes us to Heaven.", "I won't let you down, Dio!"
Victory: "I didn't hold you back, did I?", "Our victory was assured from the moment we first met."

DIO!Komaru/Mitarai: "Ryota! Heaven is so close. We can finally reach it!", "Y-yes! Let's finish this!"
Victory: "Without even having to try, we have triumphed...Ryota? What is it?", "N-N-Nothing! I wasn't staring! That'd be sexual harassment!"

Dio/Pet Shop: "Fly free and lay waste to those who dare approach me.", "#Screech!#"
Victory: "Total domination. Just as I, Dio, predicted. Their flesh shall be your reward"

Dio/UD!Kuzuryuu: "Fuyuhiko, do not make me exert myself because of your incompetence.", "I'll tear them limb from limb for you, Lord Dio!"
Victory: "This Despair...Lord Dio, was that good enough for you? Are you pleased with me?", "Tch, I grow bored of this. Let's see you bark like a dog."
Dio/UD!Peko: "Tool of the Yakuza, show me if your skills aren't as pathetic as you.", "Yes, Lord Dio."
Victory: "If Kuzuryu ever betrayed me, what would you do?", "My loyalty is to my master. I would do everything in my power to prevent his suicide.", "So this is the power of Despair."

Dio/UD!Tsumiki: "Mikan, be useful for me. Prepare Voodoo.", "Of course, my bel-I mean, Lord Dio! I'll do whatever you want from me."
Victory: "Was that good enough, Lord Dio? Am I still useful?" "Mikan, do not worry. I will not abandon you. Now tell me about those impressions of yours."

Dio/UD!Sonia: "To lay with a God is the privilege of royalty! Lord Dio! Use me however you want!", "All I need from you is to use that Stand pragmatically. Don't you dare use it while I'm in range."
Victory: "My victory was never in doubt.", "Lord Dio...insult me, beat me, whip me, do whatever you like! Anything to feel that fucking Despair!"

Dio/UD!Gundham: "Lord Dio! I dedicate this battle in your name!", "Very well then. Reveal your inner beast! Show them what a creature without humanity can do!"
Victory: "And now I feast.", "To think that Ryota's Talent could be so powerful!"

Dio/UD!Souda: "Lord Dio, I-", "Save it. Eliminate the enemy."
Victory: "I worked so hard on those designs...and now they're broken. Holy shit, it feels good!", "Despair...it twists the very fabric of its victims."

Dio/UD!Komaeda: "Komaeda, witness the infinite power of Holy Diver and know that only the Ultimate Master commands Hope.", "Lord Dio really can do anything. How can Hope ever recover?"
Victory: "Ah, this Despair. But I just have to hold on for that Hope that'll destroy you.", "I'd destroy you if you weren't so foolish. I am your Hope and your Despair!"

HD!Dio/Pucci: "So you're my friend in another world? Lend me your aid, so that I can reach Heaven.", "You share the same dream. Let's see how far you'll go."
Victory: "You truly are like Dio. Very well. Would you like to know the secret to reaching Heaven?", "The visions in my dreams? They've been answered?"

Mitarai/Pet Shop: "It's just us now. Pet Shop. Let's protect Dio's legacy.", "Screech!
Victory: "Dio always could rely on you, not like me.", "Screech!", "Ow!...You're right. I can't let self-pity control me. We have to carry the burden from here."

Mitarai/DIO: "If you're Dio...what is Heaven to you?", "To reach true happiness. If you are my friend in another world, then show me the power of your Stand."
Victory: "Impressive. Your Stand will be useful, Ryota Mitarai.", "Another Dio who wishes to bring about Heaven. If it's for a world of happiness, I'll do whatever's necessary."

Mitarai/PB!Dio: "You're my back-up? Fine. Don't you dare slow me down!", "He's so violent. Just like he was before..."
Victory: "Useless! Useless! Useless!", "Dio...I'll save this version of you as well!"

Mitarai/Pucci: "Ryota Mitarai, was it? If you are in search of Heaven, then consider us allies for now.", "If you're a friend of Dio's, then I can trust you."
Victory: "Virtual Insanity. A Stand like that could defeat even Star Platinum.", "It's nothing compared to Whitesnake. Until now, I've had to rely on Dio to do the dirty work."
Mitarai/Enya: "I'm not too old to serve the will of Lord Dio! Justice will strike his enemies down!", "Then at least let me help you! Virtual Insanity will keep them in check."
Victory: "Such a sweet, young boy. You remind me of my son.", "Thank you, Ma'am. Just so long as I could be useful."

Mitarai/Mariah: "Aren't you a cute one. Lord Dio's got you beat on looks though.", "...", "Aw, you're blushing now?"
Victory: "From this angle, you're not half-bad. Do you want a kiss on the cheek as a reward?", "Th-Ah-I-guh-Anythingtohelp!"

Mitarai/N'Doul: "You're blind?! Then let me help you. I can be useful, if we co-ordinate our Stands!", "If it is the will of Lord Dio."
Victory: "You have spirit. One that can be used for good and evil.", "If it wasn't for Dio, I'd still be wasting it."

Mitarai/Hol Horse: "That Stand's pretty neat. How about we form a team? Your Virtual Insanity and my Emperor.", "Alright then! Against my better judgement, let's do this!"
Victory: "Haha! We're unstoppable together! Now how about you help me win the heart of that lady over there.", "Using my Stand to-That's sexual harassment!"

Mitarai/Sagishi: "Mitarai, stay back. The situation's too dangerous.", "I can help too! Virtual Insanity's stronger than you think."
Victory: "See...we won together...", "And you're about to faint. What did I say about skipping meals?"

Hinata/Izuru: "So Hope triumphed over Despair. Interesting.", "Those people didn't deserve to be your test subjects."
Victory: "If it gets the ideal results, why complain about the means?", "Look in the mirror. There's your reason why."

Hinata/Komaeda: "Is Hajime really going to take the lead? Don't Stop Me Now really is our beacon of hope.", "Komaeda, maybe keep your focus on the enemy?"
Victory: "Hope always devours Despair. Isn't it wonderful?", "I'm not going anywhere, Komaeda. And we've got some stuff to talk about."

Hinata/Kuzuryuu: "Oi, Hajime. Don't think that because you've got a Requiem, it means we'll be on the sidelines.", "Wouldn't dream of it."
Victory: "So this is what Beat It can do, when it's not just bringing harm.", "We've all got things to atone for. But you gotta keep looking forward, Kuzuryuu Don't let him drag you down."

Hinata/Souda: "That Stand of yours always makes me feel self-conscious.", "Come on. I wouldn't have you by my side if I didn't need it."
Victory: "That was a close one! You really saved me out there.", "That's what friends are for. I know you'd do the same for me."

Hinata/Sonia: "Hinata...the things I've done with this Stand...", "Can be made up for by using it for justice. Just trust in yourself."
Victory: "They're not dead...I can use Ballroom Blitz without killing.", "You just had to be willing to move forward with it. I know how hard it is."

Hinata/Nidai: "Are you ready for some INTENSE TRAINING?", "Nidai, you really do take it up to
Hinata/Akane: "I'm not using 'Ultimate Chef powers' to make you food!", "Then how I am meant to use Eye of the Tiger?"
Victory: "Come oooonnn. I'll let you touch my boobs.", "First, we won without that tactic, and second, I'm not touching your boobs!"

Hinata/Ibuki: "Yo, Hinata! You ready for the 'Despair Sucks And Ibuki's Playing From The Heart From Now On' concert!", "Take it away."
Victory: "Ibuki's never letting herself down again. Just like the song says; Don't Stop Me Now! Hey, you ever wonder why our Stands are named after-", "I'd love to answer that, Ibuki. Maybe after my ears stop bleeding."

Hinata/Tsumiki: "I-I-If you trust me enough, H-Hi-Hinata-", "Tsumiki, there's no one I'd rather rely on right now."
Victory: "I'm sorry! I let everyone down! I hurt all those people!", "You weren't in control. Your Stand can heal people too. We're all here for you."

Hinata/Gundham: "So the Lord of Darkness and the Bringer of Light come together again.", "Just make sure your hamsters are out of the way."
Victory: "Ha! What do you take me for? The Dark Devas of Destruction retreated to another dimension until their energy stabilised.", "You're right. I should have more faith in you."

Hinata/Sagishi: "It's strange, fighting in this form.", "It's your form. And I think it looks good on you."
Victory: "...maybe change up the hair?", "Even if you use Don't Stop Me Now, it's not happening."

Hinata/Koizumi: "Mahiru, are you really going to take pictures right now?", "Of course I am! How else am I meant to fight?"
Victory: "...It'd also be nice to have some happy pictures again.", "I get it. That's why we took back our future."

Hinata/Saionji: "You better watch me dance! No complaining about my Stand either!", "I wasn't saying anything about your Stand!"
Victory: "Saionji, we won. You can make Safety Dance stop now. Please!", "Nope! Everyone's gonna see that lame dance of yours. Come on."

Hinata/Hanamura: "Ah, so it seems we've come together at last!", "Is that a-? Forget it. Let's just do this."
Victory: "Don't Stop Me Now...such an amazing Stand deserves an amazing meal for its user. Try this new recipe of mine.", "I swear, if this is an aphrodisiac...this is the best thing I've ever tasted."

Hinata/Peko: "A Stand that can only kill. You really want me by your side?!", "Yes, because I know you can use it without killing."
Victory: "See? You just had to trust in yourself.", "Perhaps you're right. Maybe I can reach the future I desire."

Kuzuryuu/Peko: "Young Master, I will protect you with every inch of my body.", "Hey, don't act like you're just a weapon! I'm not letting you throw yourself into danger."
Victory: "Fine! Protect me all you like. But then I'm gonna protect you with every inch of my
body!

UD!Kuzuryu/UD!Peko: "Quit slobbering, Tool! If I have to save your ass, I'm beating it later.", "As you command, Master. I exist for your desires."
Victory: "Blood on my shoe?! Tool, start cleaning. Use your tongue, before I kick your teeth in.", "Forgive my carelessness, Master."

Sagishi/Ibuki: "Byakuya-chan and Mitarai-chan aren't who they are! What should I call you?", "Perhaps we can resolve this question after the fight."
Victory: "Pillow-chan! Because you're so soft and huggable!", "I suppose that's a good a name as any."

Ibuki/Saionji: "Saionji! Are you ready to rock out with Feel The Noize!", "Yeah! Just make sure it can keep up with Safety Dance."
Victory: "Wow, we really rocked their world!", "I know! They fainted from how amazing it was!

UD!Ibuki/UD!Saionji: "I can't believe no one likes Ibuki's music.", "That's okay. We'll show them how great it is. No matter how many die in the process!"
Victory: "Some people just can't appreciate good music and good dancing.", "Right! That's why we'll be rocking and dancing until the whole world feels the Despair."

Saionji/Koizumi: "Big Sis! I won't let these weirdos bully you!", "That feels like something I should be saying to you."
Victory: "All these pictures I took are too violent.", "Take one of me then. See? Big smile!"

UD!Saionji/UD!Koizumi: "I'll bring in the people and you start taking the pictures.", "All those faces in Despair, I knew there was a reason I stay near you."
Victory: "With this...do you think Lord Dio will be interested in me now?!", "In your dreams! I'm Lord Dio's real favourite!"

Saionji/Tsumiki: "S-S-Sainoji, I-I-I-", "Save it, cow-tits. It's not like I want to work with you. Don't show me up."
Victory: "You're hurt! What did I say about showing me up? Come on, let's get you patched up.", "B-But your wounds are-Ah! Okay, let's go then!"

UD!Saionji/UD!Tsumiki: "Shit-face! You better not try anything, got it? Or do you want to keep getting bullied?!", "No! I'm sorry. I'll make sure no one touches you."
Victory: "You know, Saionji. You really should take better care of your hair.", "You took a-Mikan...I'm really sorry. Please don't. I'll let you lick my shoe-AAAAA!"

Sonia/Souda: "Sonia! Watch me take care of these guys. You won't have to do a thing!", "I'll ready Ballroom Blitz, just in case."
Victory: "Woo! We did it! And by adding our Stands together. Sonia, I-", "We should probably get going. The world won't save itself."

UD!Sonia/UD!Souda: "Hey, go and handle these fuckers for me. I might let you see a boob if you don't fuck up too hard.", "I better get something from this. I'm not letting you tease me anymore, bitch!"
Victory: "You really think you're ever getting my body? The only one worthy of me is Lord Dio!", "After what I just did, I think I earned sloppy seconds!"

Sonia/Gundham: "So a gentle soul like yourself wishes to fight along a beast like me? Very well."
"A Dark Lord and a Fallen Queen make a good combination, I'd say."
Victory: "...The corruption of Dio was what turned your purity into Despair. Do not let him control your view of yourself.", "Thank you, but maybe you should listen to your own words."

Victory: "Hey, get over here! My people are getting whiny and maybe a dog like you can motivate the lazy fuckers.", "To be collared and sicced on your people. Such a fate is only what a creature like me deserves!"

Souda/Gundham: "Looks like we'll be working together. Just remember to cool it with the flowery- ", "The Dark Lord Tanaka will not need your aid. Stand back and I shall vanquish these enemies."
Victory: "See! You wouldn't have won without my back-up. Does that make me the new Dark Lord?", "Such an insult to my title! You are lucky that we are comrades."

UD!Souda/UD!Gundham: "Oh shit, it's the Dark Retard! Got another fancy title for yourself?", "It is only because of Lord Dio's will that I have not ripped the flesh from your neck."
Victory: "As if I even needed your help, Fool. Now leave. The Devas and I must nourish ourselves.", "Come on, man! I need this Despair! And those body-part-Oh shit! Fine, I'm going."

Gundham/Nidai: "It seems that we have been brought together again. Are you willing to fight besides a creature like me.", "No doubt about it! Let's protect the future and hopes of our friends!"
Victory: "Tanaka, I never blamed you for what happened there. Don't do it yourself.", "...Ha! The Dark Lord Tanaka appreciates your unneeded words."

Nidai/Akane: "Alright! Nidai, bet I can get the last hit in!", "Just be mindful, Akane! Improper training's been known to cause injuries!"
Victory: "We won! I feel like exploding!", "Eye Of The Tiger is going into overload! You're The Best will control this fury!

UD!Nidai/UD!Akane: "Akane, are you ready to turn these people into SHIT?!", "You're goddamned right, I am! I've been waiting for a chance to stain it all with blood!"
Victory: "I feel like exploding!", "Then do it! You're The Best will turn Eye Of The Tiger into a napalm strike itself!"

Akane/Hanamura: "Okay, Akane! I've created a five-course meal and Adam's Apple is ready to get you all heated up!", "Yeah! Let's get that food into my mouth!"
Victory: "Y'know, that's not the only special sausage I have ready for-AAA! It burns!", "Sorry bout that! Just had to get the excess fire out....you okay?"

UD!Akane/UD!Hanamura: "Okay, Chef, you fill me up with food, and I fill this world with Despair.", "I have the perfect thing for you. Long pork!"
Victory: "Damn that tasted good! Always can count on you to...why do I feel so hot?", "Adam's Apple, you did it again!"

Komaeda/Sagishi: "Sagishi! It's so good to see you. Are you still upset about-", "Let's simply get this out of the way."
Victory: "If I had my memories, y'know, I'd have never-", "We all did things we regret. Now let's simply never speak of that party ever again."

Togami/Sagishi: "So you're the one who has been taking my identity.", "It's no fault of mine if people gravitate to this form."
Victory: "You dare suggest that people like your pale imitation more than the real thing?", "I merely act as the Ultimate Progeny is expected to."

Asahina/Lisa-Lisa: "Alright, Asahina. This'll be your first test!", "I won't let you down, teach!"
Victory: "I did it!", "Just adequately. You're going to have to do a lot better than that, if you want to master Ripple."

Peko/Mista: "So you are a bodyguard as well? Then let's protect our masters together.", "H-Hang on. He's not my master! But sure to all that other stuff you said."
Victory: "You have some weird ideas. Still, that resolve in your eyes...I like it.", "...Resolve isn't meant for tools."

Monaca/UD!Komaeda: "Are you ready, Monaca? It's time for your next lesson in being Despair itself.", "...Don't feel like it."
Victory: "Monaca, you need to be more enthusiastic. Especially if you want to be the next Dio.", "Don't wanna be the next Dio. I want Dio."

Holy Diver IF

HDIF!JoJo/Johnny: "Johnny? You're riding again? That's wonderful!", "Heh, of course you'd say that. Come on, let's show these guys what we can do."
Victory: "I see, so your power allows you to walk as well! And the man you've become...I always knew you had the spirit inside you.", "I learnt a lot of things, JoJo. I learnt how to move forward."

HDIF!JoJo/PB!Jonathan: "Is that another me? Just what is that aura of strength around him? Could it be his Stand?!", "A Stand? So that's what this other me calls his power."
Victory: "With The World, we will not lose Hope!", "My Ripple still burns bright! Evil will be vanquished with my Overdrive!

Victory: "The World's amazing! I just wish I didn't have to rely on you so much.", "There's nothing to be ashamed of. Livin' On A Prayer is a Stand that heals and inspires. All the strength in the world cannot match that!"

Sonia/Valentine: "It is truly an honour to meet you Mr. President! I hope that we can discuss Novoselic and the United States' future relationship later.", "Hm... Should you assist me in this matter, I swear we shall hold talks for possible trade."
Victory: "It seems that our co-operation is what achieved victory here today.", "Do not push your luck. I pray, for your sake, that Novoselic has what America needs. Then we can negotiate."

UD!Sonia/Valentine: "Tch! What's with all this 'for my country' bullshit! As leaders, it's those fuckers responsibility to bend over and kiss our feet on command!", "Truly, you do not deserve the title of Queen. A madwoman like you deserves neither her country's crown or love. Still, I shall do what I must for America's interest."
Victory: "Hey fuck-faces. You think I was kidding? Come on, time to pucker up! Right where I kicked your teeth in.", "Disgusting...you might have been useful though, if not for your madness."

Fuyuhiko/Diavolo: "Knew the boss of the Passione was fucking twisted. It makes me sick to even be near you.", "Says the boy who plays at being a gangster. Perhaps now you shall learn what it truly means to go down the path you chose."
Victory: "I'm not gonna be like you! I'll find my own way!", "With what? Kuzuryuu Gang died
trying to imitate Passione. Not that it matters for you. No one can know my identity."

UD!Fuyuhiko/Diavolo: "You call yourself a gangster!? Fuckin' pathetic! Only cowards want to
crawl into a hole and hide!", "Impudent brat! A gangster who shouts his name to the heavens and
performs needless culling is not fit for the title! Once this is over, you shall feel the full wrath of a
Secret Emperor!"
Victory: "Look who finally showed some balls!", "Did you forget my words so easily?"

Gundham/Johnny: "Most interesting! For a being of darkness to fight alongside one of the Joestar
Bloodline! Together, we shall annihilate our enemies!", "Alright 'Lord Tanaka'... with your dark
powers we'll totally win. Absolutely. Completely. Without a doubt."
Victory: "Victory is ours! The Dark Lord is impressed with that power of yours.", "It's impressive
that even Jonathan played along with this for years."

UD!Gundham/Johnny: "Lord Dio is smiling upon me. Through our cooperation, we shall see if
JoJo's fire is within you.", "Your Lord Dio's got nothing to do with this. Make a move I don't like
I'm dropping you. I don't care if you were my brother's friend."
Victory: "So you do have JoJo's blood in your veins. Lord Dio would have been pleased to see this
from you!", "You make me sick. Don't act like his friend when you're trying to destroyed everything
he believed in."

Ibuki/Johnny: "Alright Johnny-chan, Ibuki's ready to rock! Hope you can keep up to the rhythm!",
"With the way you play?! Yeah, sure. I was born to go as fast as an Olympian."
Victory: "Woo! Ibuki and Johnny-chan kicked ass! This calls for a guitar solo!", "Oh man, that
sounds great. My ears really weren't bleeding enough as it is."

UD!Ibuki/Johnny: "Ibuki can already feel your rhythm Shitty JoJo. It's not one she's looking forward
to playing along with.", "Like I care. Maybe if you were original like how you were and not Dio's
juke-box, I would give a shit about playing along with your rhythm."
Victory: "Waaa! Shitty JoJo is too shitty! Ibuki can't play right when staring at you!", "Just get the
hell away from me. Jonathan would be rolling in his grave, if he could see you now."

Gyro/Kirigiri: "Oi, stop giving me that look. I stomped all over people's hats for looks like that, you
know.", "To think a man like you is actually one of Naegi's allies..."
Victory: "Did you really have to keep that face throughout the entire battle?", "There's benefits to not
being such an open book, Mister Zeppeli."

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EoH VS Dialogue

Dio VS Mitarai: "Ryota, let's see how far you are able to take your Virtual Insanity.", "Okay, Dio.
Just try and go easy on me."
Dio Victory: "Virtual Insanity is truly one of the most powerful Stands I've ever seen. It's just a pity
that Holy Diver is stronger."
Mitarai Victory: "Dio, are you okay? You didn't have to hold back that much!"

PB!Dio VS Mitarai: "Who dares challenge Dio? Prepare for a miserable death!", "So this is Dio if he
fell into Despair? I can't lose here."
PB!Dio Victory: "That power means nothing when used by a weakling like you."
Mitarai Victory: "Dio, even if you're not the one I know, I will save you! Virtual Insanity!"
DIO VS Mitarai: "Who approaches DIO? You don't seem hostile, but...", "Dio? No...there's a chill about him. Can I trust him...?"

DIO Victory: "Your Stand is impressive, and you seem to know of Heaven. Do you wish to be my friend? We can speak in solitude."

Mitarai Victory: "That drive, those skills, you are Dio. Answer me this. What is Heaven to you?"

Pucci VS Mitarai: "You say you are a friend of Dio, and seek Heaven, but how can I believe you?", "How can I believe what you say either?"

Pucci Victory: "You have desire, but you need more than that. Strength is needed to stand by Dio's side and reach Heaven."

Mitarai Victory: "That Stand of yours. It's versatile, but it couldn't withstand Virtual Insanity."

Mitarai VS PB!Jonathan: "I know that Dio is aggressive, but I can save him! Just like with my Dio!", "I don't know who you are, but I fear you're going down a dark path. Dio doesn't seem to change even in another world."

Mitarai Victory: "It's true. My world's Dio is fighting for Hope. He's doing this for all mankind! There's no time. Just let me show you."

Jonathan Victory: "I fear you've been taken in by Dio. What he wants is not hope, but control."

Mitarai VS Jotaro: "I won't let you near him!", "Another one of Dio's followers."

Mitarai Victory: "I failed him once, I won't fail him again! See Virtual Insanity, and help us create a world of hope!"

Jotaro Victory: "Good grief. That Stand...it's almost as dangerous as The World, in those hands."

Mitarai VS Rohan: "You...I'm not afraid to fight you!", "So you decided to become the Ultimate Brainwasher, then."

Mitarai Victory: "Rohan Kishibe. I'll make you see what Hope is!"

Rohan Victory: "That was disappointing."

Hinata VS Izuru: "You think our lives were just things to use for your tests?!", "It seems you've unlocked Requiem. Let's see if it can challenge my Boulevard of Broken Dreams."

Hinata Victory: "Even if you were me once, I won't let myself be that pathetic again!"

Izuru Victory: "So my Stand became weaker? Something unexpected, and boring, all at the same time."

Hinata VS Komaeda: "Komaeda, just what are you doing?!", "I did like that simulation you so rudely pulled me out of, Hinata. Just let me get some aggression out."

Hinata Victory: "You really want to have fights to let out aggression? Some people are still mad at you."

Komaeda Victory: "Did you let me win? Or was this simply my Luck at work? You make everything so confusing, Hinata."

Dio VS Komaeda: "So you think you can defeat me? You'll fail, just like the last time.", "Last time, I didn't have a Stand. Let's see if Holy Diver can defeat Luck."

Dio Victory: "Trash will always be trash! You, who have accepted being a slave to probability, will never overcome Dio!"

Komaeda Victory: "Luck really is a dangerous thing, Dio. In the end, you were just a disappointment."

Naegi VS UD!Komaeda: "Nagito Komaeda, if you really want to help Hope, then you should be helping us!", "Help the Future Foundation? Naegi, they're just weak Hope. But I've always wanted
to see Livin' On A Prayer up close."
Naegi Victory: "Komaeda, there's a way to cure you and your classmates of Despair. It's in a place called Jabberwock Island."
UD!Komaeda Victory: "To have lost to me. The Future Foundation aren't letting you become a strong Hope. Don't worry. I'll fix that for you."

UD!Sagishi VS Togami: "So you're the pale imitation that's been dragging my identity through the dirt.", "To copy one of Lord Dio's killers brings me Despair. But I have come to grow comfortable in this form, so consider this business and pleasure."
UD!Sagishi Victory: "Lord Dio, is this sacrifice acceptable to you?"
Togami Victory: "You're lucky that I promised Naegi I'd only capture you."

Souda VS Gundham: "You copied my Stand's name?! That's it, Tanaka, we're throwing down.", "Fool! My Stand is completely different to yours. If you wish to experience the hellish powers I wield..."
Souda Victory: "I did it! I beat Tanaka! I-Hey Sonia! No, we weren't fighting. Why do you look really ma-I'm sorry!"
Gundham Victory: "Ha! Now do you know the infinite power of the Earth's animals?"

Kirigiri VS DIO: "So this is where the other Dio is. I wonder if you have Holy Diver as well. The truth will come out.", "Oh? Did the Joestars send you? No matter. No truth can overcome my world!"
Kirigiri Victory: "I underestimated him...The World...it's as dangerous as Holy Diver...maybe even more. I got lucky."
DIO Victory: "In the end, none can match The World! I, Dio, shall rule over all with my power!"

Holy Diver IF

HDIF!JoJo VS Dio: "Dio! I won't let you corrupt my friends!", "JoJo, do you still fight even now? Even with a Stand that can stop time, you'll never overcome Holy Diver!"
Dio Victory: "JoJo, you truly were the Hope of the old world. But the final, and greatest, obstacle has been cleared! I, Dio, shall burn this world and create my kingdom on top of its ashes!"
HDIF!JoJo Victory: "I did it. Now I have to save Chiaki and everyone else! I'm coming! Do not give into his Despair!"

HDIF!JoJo VS Mitarai: "Are you the real Mitarai that the others spoke of? Has Dio corrupted you too? Is that your Stand?", "Y-You have to understand. He's doing this for Hope! I can't let you stop him! I can't betray him!"
HDIF!JoJo Victory: "What has Dio done to you? Please rest. You'll be with friends when this is over."
Mitarai Victory: "If I save him here...then Dio won't have to kill him! Jonathan, I promise, you'll be
helping us make the world a better place."

Dio VS Johnny: "Dio Brando... I won't waver. Not when it comes to you.", "Ho? That determination in your eyes... it seems that the crippling did some good for you. Let us see if you can actually hope to back your words, brother of JoJo!"

Dio Victory: "Hah! That fire in your eyes was so easy to extinguish! You died as you were in life, a piece of trash craving for acknowledgement! JoJo was one of a kind, and not even his own sibling could compare!"

Johnny Victory: Jonathan... I did it. It's over. I hope you can rest easy, wherever you are.

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**Dual Heart Attacks**

Mitarai/Pet Shop: Pet Shop uses Horus to send out multiple ice-shards at the opponent, who flees into a nearby building where Mitarai is waiting for them. They recognise Mitarai's Virtual Insanity in time and exit the outdoor area. Only to find that Pet Shop has frozen the exit by the open window, which reflects Mitarai's brainwashing programme on his phone. The opponent is neutralised.

Mitarai/Sagishi: The opponent sees that Mitarai is about to use Virtual Insanity and makes for the outside. They encounter Land of Confusion and Sagishi attacks them again and again, making the opponent think that they are in Mitarai's illusion and flee backwards, thinking it will take them outside. Only they are then trapped in Virtual Insanity.

Dio/UD!Sonia: Sonia cries out that she's activating Ballroom Blitz, prompting Dio to place a hand on himself, at which point she activates its effect at maximum range. Dio negates the effect on himself and sends Holy Diver towards the approaching opponent, laying down a lightning-fast barrage of punches before sending them flying into Sonia. The impact knocks her down, but Ballroom Blitz's effect shatters the opponent's remaining bones.

Dio/UD!Kuzuryuu: The opponent manages to run away from Holy Diver and almost escapes when Beat It ambushes them and kicks them in the side of the knee. Kuzuryu grabs the opponent by the throat and Beat It's injury transfer is prepared, as Dio has Holy Diver repeatedly attack Kuzuryu's arm with one hand and keeping the gangster's grip with the other. The injuries transfer from Kuzuryu's arm to the opponent's throat.

Dio/UD!Tsumiki: Holy Diver plucks a single hair from the opponent and gives it to Tsumiki, who implants it and a hair of her own into Voodoo, as she turns to Dio. The opponent can barely react when Holy Diver begins attacking Tsumiki. The pain and injuries transfer to the opponent as Holy Diver lands a final blow on Tsumiki's gut, sending the opponent onto the floor.

Hinata/Komaeda: Komaeda dodges the opponent's attack and leg-sweeps them. He then has Get Lucky launch a duelling-series of attacks on the prone opponent, and intercepts their counter. He is about to win when the Tragedy part of Get Lucky explodes. Just before it does, though, Hinata activates Don't Stop Me Now and the Tragedy is averted. The opponent is then knocked out by Don't Stop Me Now.

Kuzuryuu/Peko: Kuzuryuu brings out Beat It and enters a battle of exchanging fists with the opponent, his Stand both lessening his injuries and increasing his opponent's. With a final blow, he sends the opponent flying towards Peko who draws her blade and uses Killing Machine to summon more blades to pierce the opponent's back. All of them stab non-fatal areas.
UD!Kuzuryu/UD!Peko: Kuzuryuu prepares to battle, but instead has Peko exchange blows. Peko manages to cut the opponent's wrist, giving her a window to send more blades directly at the opponent. Kuzuryu shoves her aside and has Beat It land the finishing blows using its power to enhance the opponent's injuries from its punches and kicks.

Ibuki/Saionji: Saionji activates Safety Dance and the opponent is trapped in her dance, Ibuki playing her guitar too loud to be caught and looking away, when she begins using Feel The Noize. Multiple sound-waves cut at the opponent, making them bleed, but they dance until they are unconscious.

UD!Ibuki/UD!Saionji: Similar to above, but Ibuki's attacks cut deeper and the opponent is made to dance even as they bleed out.

Nidai/Akane: Nidai and Akane have a challenge to see how many times she can hit the opponent without killing or crippling them. Nidai's You're The Best fills Akane's with additional energy and she moves quicker and stronger using less calories than normal. She hits dozens of blows before the opponent is knocked out.

UD!Nidai/UD!Akane: Similar to above, but she delivers more blows which cripples the opponent and Nidai starts by electrocuting the opponent until their skin begins charring, leaving them open for Akane to viciously burn and beat them to death.

Sonia/Gundham: Gundham uses Welcome To The Jungle and wraps his body around the opponent like a snake, constricting the opponent, when Sonia activates Ballroom Blitz. The opponent charges towards her, despite Gundham's grip, only for Sonia to de-activate Ballroom Blitz. The opponent is confused when Gundham changes form and releases the opponent, only to hit them with the strength of a gorilla.

UD!Sonia/UD!Gundham: Similar to above but Gundham's snake-hold is strong enough to break bones and Sonia does not de-activate Ballroom Blitz, sending the opponent flying as Gundham releases himself from them.

Sonia/Souda: Souda touches the opponent's head and uses Welcome To The Machine to make the opponent have a stronger grip. Sonia then activates Ballroom Blitz and Souda is kept restrained by the opponent, but they cannot harm him, which frees him to attack the opponent to unconsciousness. Sonia then de-activates Ballroom Blitz.

UD!Sonia/UD!Souda: Similar to the above, but Souda beats them to death when Sonia purposely does not de-activate Ballroom Blitz in time.

Sonia/Koizumi: Sonia activates Ballroom Blitz to lure the opponent in, only for Koizumi to intercept and stop them by using Into The Lens, trapping them into the world inside her camera. Sonia then de-activates Ballroom Blitz before anyone can touch her.

UD!Sonia/UD!Koizumi: Similar to the above, but Sonia uses the maximum range and does not cancel it until Koizumi touches her. Koizumi adds flames and other traps to torment the opponent until Sonia kicks her injured body.

Hanamura/Akane: Hanamura quickly creates soup which he then uses Adam's Apple on to increase the caloric content. He throws the soup over to Akane who drinks it down in a single gulp. Eye of the Tiger engulfs her body in flames as she charges forward and lands a drop-kick at high-speed onto the opponent.
UD!Hanamura/UD!Akane: The same as the above, but Akane includes enough force and heat that her leg drives through the opponent's chest. She eats a chicken leg and then feels extremely heated as Hanamura used Adam's Apple to make the food increase her arousal.

Naegi/Komaeda: Naegi has Livin' On A Prayer fire Hope Bullets at the opponent who manages to dodge them all and kicks Naegi in the stomach, as the back of his head hits the ground first, and he pulls a leg muscle when trying to get up again. This sequence of bad luck fills up the Miracle in Get Lucky and Komaeda pulls Naegi out of the way as the Miracle explode, causing a chain of events that cripples the opponent.

"Haiji"/Rohan: Rohan uses Heaven's Door to have the opponent fly at "Haiji" at 70km/h, talking about how terribly cliche this all is. "Haiji" throws an object he's primed as a bomb at the target and detonates it with them before loudly complimenting Rohan on his inventive thinking while muttering/thinking to himself how he'll eliminate him later.

"Haiji"/Komaru: "Haiji" lets the opponent get close to them before detonating a much larger bomb or releasing Sheer Heart Attack, Komaru uses We Built This City to protect both of them from the collateral AOE damage that would otherwise hurt them.
"Ryota, tell me. Does the number thirty-six hold any significance? Any spiritual meaning at all?"

"Thirty-six?...There is one concept. I remember doing research on it for my anime. I think it's called the 'Thirty-Six Righteous People'.

"Righteous? Interesting. Go on."

"It's a mystical idea in Judaism. That there are thirty-six people in this world who are born in every generation to keep humanity alive. They don't know who they are, and wouldn't recognise the others, but if even one of them died, then God would destroy mankind. They justify humanity's purpose, even if the whole species becomes wretched with sin. Since we don't know who they are, you should act like them and be righteous in all you do."

"Thirty-six souls by which an entire species is judged. If they are righteous and true, then the sins of mankind can be forgiven, and the world continues on. I wonder what it would be if there were instead thirty-six sinners chosen to represent Man, or if even one of those just souls were corrupted. Would that not mean that the world is tainted and must change?"

"I guess it's the idea that, so long as there are people who are good, evil can't truly win. It's like us. We're fighting to save humanity."

"No matter the cost. Tell me, are you afraid, Ryota?"

"...Yes. I am. I'm afraid of the people who are going to suffer because of this."

"Sacrifices must be made. As they have been already. And it will all be worth it when I, Dio, discover the way to Heaven and reach it. I believe in you."

"And I believe in you too."

"The time is drawing near. The moment when this all ends. Then, when humanity is at its lowest, and knows nothing but Despair..."

"We'll show them Hope."
Here laid the hope of the old world.

All of them unconscious and draped on the floor in a variety of poses. From Kyosuke Munakata to Ruruka Andou to even Makoto Naegi, all of the Future Foundation's leading lights were helpless to the only two people who were still awake. Not even Chisa Yukizome was trusted with this.

Mitarai held the Stand Arrow that Dio had entrusted to him, so long ago, and stared down at them. Monaca's Arrow was safely stored away with Dio's remains, in case of an emergency.

It'd be so easy to take away their lives. Just as Pet Shop was slaughtering the guards in the building, Mitarai could just kill them now. Forget the game and simply take out his enemies, or even simply use Virtual Insanity when they woke up and have them all serve him immediately.

No. He had to do this right. They could still be saved, and with minimal brainwashing.

*This is it, Dio. The end of all this.* Mitarai looked to Tengan, who nodded. The Ultimate Animator began stabbing each member of the Future Foundation with the Arrow.

Moving the bodies had been easy with Tengan and Pet Shop's help. He'd have had Yukizome help, but he preferred to keep her away from himself as much as possible. Just looking at her sometimes made him uneasy. in spite of her loyalty so far.

It's why he positioned himself closest to the doors when he entered the room. So that he'd have an excuse to leave when the Final Killing Game would begin. It helped that it'd be an escape from whatever Stand she'd awaken, or from whatever she decided to do now that she was free to be Despair in the open.

There were some things that he wouldn't be able to control. How many people she'd manage to seriously hurt with her Stand was one of them. A sacrifice that Dio would have never made for a plan like this. Whether it'd bring the necessary chaos to drive them all apart or not, it'd give up too much control.

However, Mitarai couldn't simply do what Dio would do. This had to be his own plan through his own efforts.

They'd turn on each other, when seeing Yukizome in her Despair. Munakata would go mad with zealotry and try to exterminate Naegi, who'd be unable to stop all the madness. Everyone would fight each other as their two Hopes proved nothing more than dressed-up Despair and ineffective platitudes.

That was the essence of the Future Foundation. If anything, Mitarai was giving it a mercy-killing.

As the world outside embraced happiness and Hope, the Future Foundation would realise just what the old world would have become, if it weren't for Dio. They'd see the peace and harmony that Mitarai's anime would offer. They'd see what the Ultimate Hope really looked like.

Naegi...Mitarai knew that he meant well, and wouldn't be upset if things ended quick enough and he'd live. But if Dio's killer got in the way, he wouldn't hesitate to handle the problem.

For too long, he had just sat back and let Dio be the one to carry the burden of their sins. All Mitarai had to do was scurry away while Dio had to be the one to murder and torture his own classmates. He even made the Warriors of Hope face Komaru Naegi alone.
No wonder Monaca had lost all her fire. She burned out because Mitarai was afraid to get involved and now she was simply watching with what everyone else thought was Gekkogahara. The only way she'd get involved would probably be to harm Naegi somehow.

It was Mitarai's turn to sin now. It was his turn to be the one who brought Despair, all in the name of Dio, and to crush Hope.

But if it was for the world of happiness, he'd do it.

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"Rohan-sensei, I respect you. I respect you a lot." Komaru said. She stood her ground against his stare. "But I stand by my views. Sailor Moon is my favourite Sailor Senshi!"

"That is wrong. You have never been more wrong in your entire life." Rohan motioned to the action figure in his hand. "Sailor Jupiter is the most fleshed-out character in the series and has multiple nuances and fears that makes her the most interesting of the characters. You rarely see a female character with masculine interests that actually tried to make a statement on duelling masculinity and femininity and is a fantastic role model."

Rohan then gave her that typical Rohan Kishibe look that said 'You're dumb and your opinions are dumb'.

"You prefer Usagi because she reminds you of yourself. Merely pretending that you're Sailor Moon."

"And what's wrong with that?" Komaru asked.

"You're both getting worked up about a show for little girls?" Touko offered. She barely kept the mockery out of her voice this time.

Komaru and Rohan ignored Touko as they resumed their battle of wills. Normally, Komaru wouldn't neglect her best friend like that, but this was too serious to let herself be distracted. She wouldn't back down now; even to the author of *Pink Dark Boy*!

She'd have never imagined doing this, just a year ago. Komaru Naegi was just your everyday girl who had been kidnapped for months, thrown into a crazy world of Hope, Despair, robots, children, and Stands. Too afraid to do anything on her own.

Now she was Komaru Naegi; self-appointed head of the Towa City Rescue Team, leading an elite task-force of amazing people to save Towa City and the victims inside it. Touko Fukawa, Rohan Kishibe, and the Oingo Boingo Brothers all helped her out on this.

Right now, they were waiting for the okay for their next mission, and were passing the time in Komaru and Touko's hotel room. Komaru had been telling Rohan what she thought of *Magician's Corner*, his look at the magical girl genre from the lenses of a male main character, when the topic of the Sailor Senshi came up.
"Don't worry, Big Sis! I think she's cool too!" Said Mondatta, also known as 'Boingo', the younger of the two brothers. His approval made Komaru smile. It was nice to have someone who always openly showed support. Touko and Rohan were her friends/mentors, but they could be...blunt about their opinions.

Touko started muttering under her breath. "Shouldn't you be paying more attention to Thoth? Unless we want a repeat of what happened last time."

"Hey, Boingo's Stand got it right. Finding that cat made us feel joy we never knew before." Zenyatta, a.k.a 'Oingo', replied. He was always defensive about his brother, since people were normally mean to them.

"Because it made us a bunch of idiots. Making us fawn over that damn spoilt thing like that. So much like its tacky owner." Rohan said.

It definitely wasn't a nice kitty. Grand Bois Cheri Ludenberg was anything but a nice kitty. He hissed at the Rescue Team, barely came out for his 'favourite meal' gyoza, and unleashed his Stand the second that they let their guard down.

If it wasn't for We Built This City, Komaru would have been hit by What's New Pussycat and been like the others. Each one of them had been infected, at some point, and acted like that cat was the greatest thing ever. It was more work defeating that feline than it was fighting off the Murralsee.

Komaru did see Touko, Syo, and Rohan speak babyish though, so it wasn't all bad. They may have made her swear to never speak of it again, but she always had the memory!

She could look on the bright side. Grand Bois Cheri was safe, and far away, with the Future Foundation and she was the last of the Hunted. The hostages of Makoto's classmates were now all safe. Towa City was calming down as children were being evacuated and treated, while the adults were losing their venomous fire.

The endless war this city was trapped in seemed close to ending.

Hagakure, Yuta, Taichi. I hope you're all happy with us. Komaru wondered if they'd be proud. They'd lost their lives to this tragedy, and now it was almost over. The Rescue Team had even gotten a report from the former Warriors of Hope.

Shingetsu explained everything. Monaca had holed up in a fortress and filled it up with every last Murralsee left in Towa City, after the last factory was destroyed. Komaeda had long-since abandoned her for the Neo-World Program. It was just her and a few hundred Murralsee, all in one place.

"Is Togami going to call soon?" Komaru asked.

"He'd better. Otherwise we spent the last hour doing nothing." Rohan frowned at her. "You still didn't tell me if you thought keeping a male protagonist was the right decision."

"I thought it was pretty neat! I wish I'd see what Irene is like though." Komaru thought she heard Boingo open his mouth, as Rohan's glare hardened. She turned to see him intently reading his manga, sweating from whatever twist had just happened! She must have just heard the wind.

"Are you sure we can trust those brats? After all the stuff they pulled?" Touko was uneasy about the
whole thing. She didn't trust the ex-Warriors like Komaru did.

"They did a lot of bad things...but they had bad stuff done to them first. And Dio was all they knew. It must be hard to break from his legacy like this." Komaru said. "I'm trusting that they want to protect the children of this city just as much as we do."

If it didn't make everyone- Touko and Rohan- happy, then it at least satisfied them. The five of them were just passing the time until they got word from Togami about the exact location of this fortress and whether to go for the mission. They set up the communication device that linked to the Future Foundation, although only Togami seemed to take their calls, up on the drawer.

Maybe this time they'd get through a briefing without Togami arguing with Rohan or being mean to Touko! That'd be so lucky for her that Komaru would wonder if she stole her brother's Talent somehow.

Until then, they were waiting in the hotel room and enjoying each other's company. If Touko was being a bit more bitter than normal, after Komaru had made her undress and shoved her against the wall, before having this meeting.

"It's her fault that she doesn't bathe enough. Accusing me of sexual harassment. The kind of stuff that Genocider Syo would say to her! Touko still accused Komaru of being into incest! They may be best friends, but Komaru refused to put giving Touko a bath on the same level as that.

But, if that was the worst of her problems, then Komaru felt confident in saying that the future ahead was as bright as ever.

The screen turned on, at that very moment, and revealed a pitch-white screen. It must have been Togami contacting the Rescue Team about Monaca's location. Everyone turned their attention to the monitor, except Rohan who had to be cool and stay standing by a wall on the other side of the room. Touko was to her right, and the Oingo Boingo Brothers to her left.

She could feel the anticipation in the air. They'd finally be moving out!

"I thought he had a meeting," Touko whispered to herself. "It must have ended earlier than I-"

The screen went black. Not as in the console turned off, but the screen itself went black and was now relaying a message. Something about this being an emergency override broadcast or something. The monitor had been acting up for a while now, mostly showing that message every other time Togami called them, so Komaru ignored it.

It went on for half a minute until it stopped. Komaru felt goosebumps crawl over her skin before seeing the screen go from pitch-black to showing something else.

An open field? A beautiful, green field like something from a portrait come to life. On the centre of the screen read two sentences, the second just below the first.

_Eye of Heaven._

_By Ryota Mitarai._

"Ryota Mit-Komaru, Touko! Look away!"
A distant voice screamed in fright, but Komaru barely noticed; almost entirely captivated by the sight before her.

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"Makoto Naegi. Did you ever expect to see me again?" Dio's eyes held that same mad gleam that he remembered from Hope's Peak. "After you murdered me in Hope's Peak, your sister nearly destroying my spirit, and then Izuru deleting my Alter Ego? Does this not send a shiver down your spine?"

His name is Hajime Hinata. Naegi wanted to say more than that. He wanted to scream and shout about how Dio couldn't have done it. He can't have cheated death, after all.

But he couldn't. He was stuck against a wall and couldn't even speak, for fear of accidentally angering the person keeping him- and everyone else- stuck to the walls of the meeting room. The best he could do was defiantly glare at the screen showing Dio's smirking head.

Dio's head, without the blood, looked just like it did when the guillotine came down and sliced it off his body. It must have been the jar filled with some kind of preserving fluid. The human head was said to be capable of surviving a handful of seconds after decapitation, but not two years! Even if Holy Diver negated his death, unless it reformed his body, Dio should have died anyway!

Not that Dio was ever bound by the rules of what should be.

The Tragedy came about because Dio saw himself as above all laws and rules. As if he was so great that all others on the planet were nothing more than tools to use for his ascension to godhood. Class 77-B were nothing but useful weapons to command, until they overcame his control.

That was why Naegi was here. He knew the risks of using the Neo-World Program on the Remnants of Despair and he took them anyway. There was no way he could allow more innocents to die, as a result of Dio's ambition. The fact that things went wrong might have been a point against him.

Naegi hadn't expected the Future Foundation to have put him on trial. They had wanted the Arrow inside Hinata and Naegi had instead let it stay with Class 77-B. Sakakura may have been the one to punch him, but he knew that some of the others felt the same. It was only because of Tengan that he was supposed to get a trial.

Until the room filled with gas and Naegi was knocked out just like the others. Livin' On A Prayer could heal him, so long as he had Hope, but it couldn't stop him from inhaling the gas.

When he woke up, he found himself being thrown from the ground and against the walls of the room. Him and every other person in the room barring Gekkogahara, who instead had the back of her chair against the wall, and the person keeping them constrained.

Chisa Yukizome giggled as she moved back and forth, standing on the balls of her feet, while her Stand stood behind her and gazed at its captives with contempt-filled eyes. It looked like one of those English boarding school teachers with the Oxford cap on its head, the black gown covering most of its body, and a long wooden ruler in its hand. Its skin was grey and its eyes were pure white, apart from the right eye which had an almost comically large monocle, and tufts of white-grey hair escaped
from the sides of its cap.

Its bony hands were constantly moving, the right twirling the ruler, and the left adjusted the red and yellow striped tie it wore. It had a large toothy grin on its face, but Naegi knew it had no good intentions for them.

Yukizome called it Another Brick In The Wall.

Dio chuckled to himself. "The Future Foundation. You were meant to be the remnants of the old world that I, Dio, would crush under my boot as I made this world my own. Instead, here you are, bickering and feuding amongst yourselves like starving dogs." He looked ahead to where Yukizome stood, right at the centre of the room. "So sure of yourselves that you never realised the traitors in your midst."

"Chisa...why?" Munakata forced the words out, even as he was pushed against the wall.

"No talking in class!" Yukizome snapped. Another Brick In The Wall smacked its ruler against the table, the cracking noise making Naegi flinch, as the former teacher kept staring right at the screen. "Lord Dio is speaking." She said. Dio ignored the interruption.

"That is why I, Dio, have returned to extinguish you false hopes and rebuild myself anew! Welcome, Makoto Naegi, to the Final Killing Game!" Dio's eyes shifted to the right at the screen divided into two halves, the left showing Dio's head and the right showing their bracelets. "The bracelets around your wrists have commands placed in them that must not be broken. Those who commit their 'Sin' will be injected with a poison that will kill you within seconds. As for the game itself, another poison will send you to sleep, except for my Friend. The one who prepared this for me."

Dio's smile changed. Naegi couldn't believe what he was seeing. Its usual venom was gone and instead replaced by genuine, pure happiness.

"Yes. My Friend. The one who will have this time to do whatever he wishes with it. The one who has been by my side this entire time. The only one who I trusted with my will and a Stand of their own." Just as quickly as it came, the true smile went away, and his usual smirk returned. "That's right. All this time, you've had a Stand user in your midst. The one meant to lead my followers in your organisation to destroy it from within, after my final victory at Hope's Peak. Yukizome is one of the many agents I had in this group. That's where the true threat comes in,"

"All of you now have the Stand power that you've spent years searching for! Now is your chance to use them! Who among you have always been loyal to Dio? Who will use this time to destroy the organisation that dared to challenge Dio? Who can you trust? The world shall watch as the Future Foundation tears itself apart! This is my rebirth, Naegi! And it shall come from the ashes of this hypocritical clique of liars and fools! You thought you could truly defeat Dio? It's useless, useless, useless, useless, USELESS!"

The screen shut off then and they were all left to be Yukizome's exclusive captive audience. All of them were stuck against the walls of the room like trophies from a hunt; all for Yukizome to watch and play with however she wished. Dio's absence meant that she was no longer enraptured.

She sighed in awe, Munakata gritting his teeth harder at that, and she turned to the Vice-Chairman of the Future Foundation. The one who was meant to have been her boyfriend, if what Naegi heard was right. He had stopped struggling against Another Brick In The Wall's power, unlike Sakakura, and contented himself with staring at Yukizome with a neutral expression.
Naegi didn't know how he could do it.

"Kyosuke, there's actually something else." Yukizome said. She blushed and looked away from him, putting a hand to her cheek. "I've been loyal to Dio since the beginning, as you can guess. But there's more! I was never lucky enough to be his Friend, but I was lucky in another way."

Sakakura struggled harder and let out a roar of anger. Munakata just bit his lip and muttered something.

"The children had to die. It brought me Despair." Yukizome tilted her head as if confused that that wasn't a good enough reason. "But no. I mean something else. Are you ready? Because this is going to be super-extra-despairing!"

She put a hand inside her jacket and pulled out a photograph, keeping the picture close to her body, as she then stepped closer to Munakata. She was so close that the only people other than Munakata who'd see the picture would be Sakakura and Tengan, who were trapped at his right and left respectively.

Naegi didn't know what Yukizome showed him, but it was enough to wipe away whatever control he had left. The Vice-Chairman's body jerked forward in a renewed attempt to break free from the force keeping him stuck to the wall. Sakakura roared and tried to kick his legs free, but it was for nothing.

"That's right," Yukizome stumbled back and beamed. The tears still ran down her cheeks. "The joining of two bodies and two souls! The time where you take a relationship to a new level! The day we dreamed of becoming one! But my first time wasn't with you, Kyosuke, but with Dio!"

Was Naegi just useless?! He desperately turned his head left and right, trying to see if any other members of the Future Foundation were able to use their Stands. To his right, Gozu and Sakakura fought to break free and failed as always. Munakata and Tengan waited in silence. Mitarai was stuck by the doors, his head just outside as he screamed for help, while Gekkogahara and Asahina were left gasping at Yukizome's words. The Ocean was trying its best, but remained a puddle just above Asahina's head.

To his left, Kizakura looked down with an emotionless expression and Kirigiri bit her lip while Detective Man remained stuck against the wall, Kimura glared at Yukizome with a fire that almost scared Naegi as much as Sakakura did. Beyond her was Andou and Izayoi who were stuck on the wall to his left, the latter moving to hold the hand of the former, who had closed her eyes and was muttering to herself.

It was probably because of the corpse that shared the wall with them. Bandai's poisoned body was proof that Dio hadn't been bluffing.

Another Brick In The Wall flicked its ruler left to right and Bandai's body hovered over towards where Yukizome was standing. She twirled in place as her Stand moved its ruler upwards and Bandai's right arm did the same, showing the bracelet that revealed his 'Sin'.

"'No witnessing violence'. I guess even hitting your back on the wall counts as violence." Yukizome said. She clapped her hands and turned to face her captive audience. "Okay, everyone, let's go down the line and see everyone's Sin. We need to know what we can't break. I'll go first." Yukizome pulled her sleeve back and showed it to everyone. "'Kyosuke Munakata dies.' Isn't that wonderful?"
Munakata had went from broken silence to boiling fury. He seemed ready to scream. That was until his face froze, he closed his eyes, and let out an exhale. The Vice-Chairman's face went blank, as if he had killed every emotion within, even as Yukizome went down the walls left and right of Naegi and made them lift their arms.

Another Brick In The Wall trailed behind her as she made hums and 'ah-ha' noises with each bracelet, although she was taking her time with Andou, which gave Naegi the chance to try and turn his head towards Kirigiri. His friend would know what to do.

"Naegi, there's a limitation to her Stand." Kirigiri whispered. Naegi tried his best to not look at how close Yukizome was getting to Andou, who whined in protest. "It can control pushing and pulling force, enough that we're pinning down on the walls, but her range is restricted to this room. The precision of its control of our bodies seem to rely on-
"

"Kirigiri, what did I say about talking in class?" Yukizome marched straight towards them. Both she and Another Brick In The Wall were glaring as they stopped directly in front of the Ultimate Detective. "I can't believe it. I never had to use the switch on my students...though maybe that's why they became Ultimate Despair. I guess it's never too early to introduce discipline. Especially for Lord Dio's murderers. Kirigiri, show me your hands."

A flick of the ruler and Kirigiri's arms slowly raised themselves straight ahead, even as they shook from her attempts at fighting it.

"No. Those are your gloves. I said your hands." Yukizome's tone was clipped. Naegi and Kirigiri went pale at that, even as the latter's hands were already starting to move towards the other.

Kirigiri was fighting as hard as Sakakura was now. Her arms and hands were shaking and beads of sweat ran down her head. Why wouldn't they? Kirigiri's hands never came off from her hands. The only people she allowed to see them were who considered family. People like the survivors of the Mutual Killing Game.

Now Yukizome was going to make a show of Kirigiri's darkest secrets in front of the entire world.

Kizakura seemed to understand the gravity of the situation, looking as horrified as Kirigiri was.

Naegi had to stop it, just managing to lift his head away from the wall. "Yukizome, please! Whatever it is that Dio did to-
"

Another Brick In The Wall shot its hand toward and five bony fingers gripped his hair by the roots. They pushed back and Naegi felt the back of his skull crash against the hard surface of the wall. Asahina gasped from his left and began making noises, showing that now even she was struggling against the Stand's control.

"Another Brick In The Wall is going to make your skull a brick in the wall, if you don't stay quiet." Yukizome hissed. Naegi barely paid attention, even as the pain rang through his skull. His attention was solely on the woman next to him.

So softly that only he and Yukizome heard it, the latter's smile growing, Kirigiri whimpered as the tips of her fingers were touching the ends of her gloves and were slowly starting to pull them of-

"Hey!" Asahina barked. Naegi and Yukizome turned to see Asahina swimming in the air, with a
look of red-hot fury on her face. "Get away from my friends!"

Another Brick In The Wall was the perfect Stand for a setting like this. All the enemies in a single room with no one outside to send in help. You could pin them on the wall or throw them around it at high speeds, and they wouldn't be able to stop you. All you had to do was keep a close eye on the room and maintain your focus.

Yukizome had even pushed The Ocean against the wall above Asahina so that it couldn't interfere. She was a quick-thinker. Definitely the kind of person who'd teach at Hope's Peak. She forgot one thing, however, and that was The Ocean's second ability.

For a range of 2m, Asahina could change the air around her to have the properties of being under breathable water. Said properties included changing the way gravity worked.

Yukizome could barely react in time before Asahina pushed a hand forward and the part of The Ocean that was once stuck on the wall rushed forward. A torrent of the water slammed against Another Brick In The Wall's chest and sent it flying!

It slammed against the wall and Yukizome went with it. She had forgotten the hidden weakness of a Stand user; damage to the Stand hurt the user as well.

She kept enough control that the walls left and right of Naegi still had the Branch Heads stuck to them. For Naegi's wall, however, they were free! Mitarai landed on the floor with a cry and Gekkogahara immediately started typing on her keyboard.

"Quickly! We need to get away fast! She can't make us reveal our Sins if we get away!" Gekkogahara cried out, using the Usami avatar.

Mitarai threw the doors open and Kirigiri, Asahina and Naegi managed to get a foot out of the door before Yukizome could regain her composure. Their Stands followed behind to keep them from being used to reel them back in. They turned to see a perfect view of the room, dark as it was with the lights out. Gekkogahara was about to follow them when she was pulled back, just before she could get even a wheel out.

"Nooooo! Teacher! Leave this kid alone!"

"Gekkogahara! No helping the delinq-" Yukizome sniffed loudly and turned to Andou with a strange smile. "Andou, you-"

That was when the left wall section around Andou and Izayoi broke apart.

It was strange. Was this Izayoi's Stand? Or someone else's Stand. The point was that the wall had crumbled and now, as Naegi just managed to see it from the corner of his eye, Izayoi and Andou were standing in the centre of a tunnel. A tunnel that led to the hallway outside!

*Did one of their Stands do that?* Naegi was too far away, and the room too dark, for him to get a better look. He just had to guess that it was Izayoi's Stand at work.

Izayoi, finally free of Another Brick In The Wall's effect, pulled out a knife and threw straight at Yukizome's head.

Naegi froze up. They couldn't kill her! She might have been like Class 77-B; a victim of Dio just as
much as those who died in the Tragedy. They could still knock her out and restrain her, especially if her Stand's range was a single room!

"No, wai-" Naegi's protest was cut off.

The knife had stopped. It hadn't even slowed down, but simply a single jerking motion and then it hovered in the air. Hovered like Bandai's corpse had been until Yukizome was done with it. The second it had entered the room; and thus fell under Another Brick In The Wall's effect.

"It seems I have some very naughty students in the classroom. As Lord Dio used to say," Yukizome smiled as Another Brick In The Wall began violently flailing its ruler left and right. "Spare the rod, spoil the child."

The people left stuck on the walls- Kizakura, Gozu, Gekkogahara, Tengan, Munakata, and Sakakura- flew towards the centre of the room and formed a circle of bodies. They slowly span around the room in formation, even Gekkogahara stuck in her chair, and Yukizome smiled to herself.

Naegi looked at Kirigiri and Asahina, and then to Mitarai behind him, before exhaling. He didn't know how long he'd been holding in his breathes, but now he had a clear head to try and analyse the situation. To find a way to take down Yukizome without killing her.

They were outside of her control and were the only Stand users, apart from Dio's Friend, who had them for more an a handful of minutes. Izayoi and Andou were also outside and the former's Stand was at least strong enough to break through stone and metal. All that, and they had wild-cards in Andou and Mitarai's Stands.

Naegi could do this. His friends could do this. The Future Foundation could do this.

They'd disable Yukizome, come together to figure out what to do next, and then they'd start tracking down Dio's Friend. It was one person against all of them. No matter what their Stand could do, it wouldn't defeat their Hope.

They had overcome Dio's will three times now. Hope's Peak, Towa City, and the Neo-World Program. He wouldn't win this time either.

Naegi just had to stay positive.

They'd be out of this death-trap in no time.

---

Yasuhiro Hagakure hid under the rocks and hoped to God that the feeling in his underwear was just sweat.

_Maybe it won't see me. It's just a bird and I'm hiding under cover. Just gotta stay still and trust in my predictions._ He told himself. It got him out of trouble with the Kuzuryuu Gang, and it'd get him out of trouble now.

It might have been more him hiding for a couple of years and then fleeing behind Hope's Peak, but
who was asking?

Hagakure had changed since then! He now had a Stand! He kind-of almost helped kill Dio with it as well. Sure, it couldn't fight like The Ocean, Gold, and Smells Like Teenage Spirit. Yeah, it couldn't turn a battlefield into a chessboard like Detective Man, and yeah, it couldn't inspire and heal like Livin' On A Prayer...

In The Year 2525 just needed time! Hagakure managed to save Leon's cousin that one time in Towa City- he got a badge from the Rescue Team and everything!- and he survived the Mutual Killing Game. All he had to do was have faith and it'd all work out.

After all, he now had a 200 million Yen crystal ball! The effort that went into taking the funds from the Future Foundation had paid off! Now In The Year 2525 had the proper containment it needed to truly unleash its full potential!

It couldn't happen soon enough. Hagakure had been waiting outside, as demanded, and was about to complain to one of the guards when he heard people screaming. Talking about how the hallways were filling up with ice and that everyone was dying inside.

The next thing he knew, he and dozens of armed guards were pointing their guns at one angry-looking falcon that had a skeletal pterodactyl behind it. Hagakure tried to point out the latter part, but he just got told to stop joking around by some of the guards.

The others believed him. That was probably why some attacked immediately and others ran.

Not that it helped when the falcon was flying in the air and throwing down shards of ice that cut off any retreat. Its body easily sank into the red skies and black clouds, unable to be seen until it sent down more ice to slaughter them all with.

"Come on...this is stupid!" He whispered to himself, burrowing deeper into the rocks as he stared into the crystal ball. "How did the bird even get a Stand in the first place? Wait no, I didn't mean that, In The Year 2525. What is it going to do next?"

In The Year 2525 was already beginning to create a picture from the purple-gas itself. Hagakure knew that his Stand wasn't the greatest. It needed a specific question to actually start showing Hagakure its predictions, and he didn't even know how long into the future its images would be.

But any fortune-teller worth their salt could at least make a lucky guess. That went double for what he was seeing.

An avalanche. Falling snow. Snow was basically just tiny ice crystals. A mountain; basically just a giant rock.

Ice covering rock.

*I need to get out of here!* Hagakure's dashed away from his cover. It was basically just a rock formation that protected him from all but one side, but he had thought it'd hide him and the bird would think he was dead.

Nope. He just barely got out of there in time to avoid six ice-shards shooting downwards and crashing against the rocks. Ice spewed from the explosion and coated the entire area. If Hagakure hadn't gotten out of there in time, he'd have been frozen solid like those stones.
He held his crystal ball just a bit closer to his chest as he kept running. All he could do was serpentine and hope that that'd be enough to confuse the damn thing. All he needed to do was buy time until the Future Foundation reinforcements arrived.

Togami wouldn't let him down! If Hagakure could hide and survive long enough to actually see his friend again.

That falcon...it was as bad as Dio!

"I hope Naegs and the others are doing better than me!" He screamed out loud.

---

"Sir! We're getting reports that ninety percent of branches have been compromised! They're spreading by the hour."

"Special Forces have started returning our calls! They say they had orders to storm Jabberwock Island and eliminate the Remnants of Despair until they saw the transmission. Should we-"

"Don't. They've been compromised. Nothing else could have shaken their loyalty to Munakata. No visual communications."

"We've tracked down the source of the broadcast. It's coming from the Future Foundation Headquarters."

"So Monaca's going all-out in her Dio-act. How long until we reach HQ?"

"Another hour."

"What do we do if we encounter resistance at the HQ?"

"Eliminate it. We have to assume that she's compromised the Tenth Branch Head and the Towa City Rescue Team. It won't be long until people converge here and that'll be when we lose them. We have to take out that broadcast, at all costs!"

"Yes sir!"

---

"Munakata?"

How much of it was a lie?

"Are you alright?"

Mahiru Koizumi probably took those pictures. Of course a Remnant of Despair would enjoy the sight of her teacher being made to kneel like a dog and-
"I shouldn't have fucked up at the meeting room. Having to be saved by that prick- then he acts like whoever's doing this can just get away with it."

The children in the park. Their promises to one another. The dream of a world without Despair.

It was all simply a game Dio played. All just setting it up to shatter Munakata's spirit when the time came. Ch-Yukizome was a part of Despair this whole time. She captured and toyed with them; all to show how easy it'd be for her to simply snuff out their lives one by one.

"Fuckin' Gozu. We could have been smart about it, if he hadn't gotten in the way. Same with Tengan's little side-kick, getting in the way like that. Probably just wanted to look good in front of the swimmer."

Munakata's dreams all had Yukizome in them. She'd be standing by his side as they erased Despair from this world and left only Hope for the future generations. The nightmare of the Tragedy would be a thing of the past and everyone would be happy.

"Munakata...come on. Say something. You've always got a plan."

Yes. He always did have a plan. He had a plan for getting around Tengan if the Chairman managed to get Naegi free and let the Remnants of Despair live, or if the other Branch Heads lost their nerve. He had a plan for ending the Remnants of Despair and bringing them to justice. He even had a plan for seeing who Dio's Friend was.

Nothing had changed. The dream was still alive. All he simply had to do was put Yukizome to the side and focus on the goal.

Naegi was almost worse than Despair. He tolerated it. He accepted the risks of Dio returning in ten bodies, all with their own Stand, if it meant putting his mind at ease. Dio had even been offered a trial at Hope's Peak. As if he'd accept any authority but his own.

Perhaps he had lied about Towa City. He let Monaca's Stand Arrow be lost because he feared what would happen if the Future Foundation had Stands of their own. If they no longer relied on him and his friends. They'd pursue justice their way then.

Now Munakata had a Stand of his own. So did Sakakura and Kimura. The only two people he could trust now. Andou had her own agenda and Izayoi would follow her without question. He would never betray his love.

Not love; addiction. It was likely that Andou controlled him with her sweets. It was simply the control a drug-dealer has over an addict.

Tengan sympathised too much with Naegi. His heart had grown as weak as his body, when it came to fighting Despair. Gozu made his allegiance clear and Mitarai seemed attached to Tengan's cause. Gratitude for being saved from the Tragedy and being given a Branch. Not to mention lingering sympathy for his classmates.

If he was lucky, he'd only have to kill Naegi. His death would break the spirit of his friends and Tengan would have no reason to challenge him. Clean and simple.

"The plan is simple," Munakata turned to Sakakura. There was no doubt or hesitation in his expression. "We eliminate Makoto Naegi, and anyone who gets in the way of that."
Sakakura smirked and his Stand manifested behind him. It was humanoid and stood at the same height as Sakakura himself, wearing some kind of dark-grey hoodie that covered most of its torso and head, except for shining pink eyes, and a championship belt around its waist. It had black boots similar to what Sakakura used to wear in boxing tournaments.

Its main features, however, was the mouth in a constant snarl and the blood-red boxing gloves that it had in place of hands. The perfect Stand for someone like Juzo Sakakura; the Ultimate Boxer having a Stand that seemed to specialise in punching.

Munakata's Stand only began to manifest itself when fighting against Gozu. He could tell from the strokes of his blade that he had picked an unfortunate opponent to test the Stand on. That went double when accounting for Gozu's own Stand.

Yet he had been content with its appearance. It was the same height and had the same body structure as Munakata himself, which made dodging attacks far easier compared to Gozu's bulkier Stand, and its features were a clean metallic-silver skin that went all the way from its feet to its collarbones. That when when silver gave way to black, as the head and neck of his Stand was seemingly covered by a black cowl that only revealed bright blue eyes. It was much like the medieval executioner whose identity was protected by such a cowl. Only this cowl was its skin.

In its right hand was a sword much like Munakata's own. Yet the blade had a unique pattern to it; black and white swirled around from the base of the blade to the very tip, the borders between the two colours sharply distinct. Just as with Good and Evil, Love and Hate, Truth and Lies, and Hope and Despair, the colours remained separate and their own, always apart.

This was the Stand of Kyosuke Munakata; Killing In The Name.

*And that name is Hope. Makoto Naegi, you will die so that this world will never again be threatened by Dio or Despair.*

---

Kirigiri couldn't stop herself from flinching when she felt a hand on her right shoulder. She turned, expecting to see a Stand she knew nothing about, and instead saw the face of Kazuo Tengan, Chairman of the Future Foundation.

"Violence is wrong. Violence causes Despair." Tengan said, likely to calm her nerves. Another hand gripped her right upper-arm. "It seems that we'll be working together, then."

*I didn't see his Stand during the fight with Yukizome. His Stand could work by touch. He was in the ideal position to place that virus into the building.* Kirigiri was about to summon Detective Man when she saw Mitarai kneeling behind him. *Damn.*

"Chairman, you can't touch her like that!" Mitarai said, as if he was the old man instead of a teenager. "That's sexual harassment!"

"No it's not."
"She's clearly uncomfortable." Mitarai insisted.

Tengan sighed, as if those few sentences took the energy out from him, and turned back to face Kirigiri.

"Kirigiri, I won't hurt you." He said, showing none of the facial expressions that gave away a liar.

Detective Man could easily discover his lies, with the use of its Truth Bullets, but that statement could mean anything. All it'd prove was that Tengan had no immediate plans to do her harm. Questioning him further risked alienating him or, if he was involved, tipping him off to her suspicions.

Not that she suspected him alone. Kirigiri had to consider everyone apart from the survivors of the Killing Game to be potential Masterminds. It was simply that Tengan was the only one of them to approach her.

If he was the culprit, it'd be better for her to have him in her sights. Detective Man could pin him down as a 'Suspect' at any time and she'd be able to fire Truth Bullets or constrain his movement if necessary. If he wasn't the culprit, then she was simply being cautious about a new ally.

In this mystery, she'd need all the friends she could get.

The fourth time-limit passes and Makoto Naegi still lives.

The fourth time-limit. That was how long she had to find out the Mastermind- the Friend Dio spoke of in the Neo-World Program and now on the video- was and stop them. She couldn't simply do what Munakata would. Just go down the line and kill whoever she felt the most suspicious of.

She needed proof and that'd require examining the crime scene itself. There was something about this building that gave her a strange feeling.

What did she know about Tengan and Mitarai, other than their roles and Talents? She knew that Mitarai's Stand was called Virtual Insanity and that he played a minor role in what was Asahina and Izayoi's victory.

Yukizome's Another Brick In The Wall could only control the gravity of the room, and it was reliant on focus and to a limited extent depending on distance. Beyond a certain range, she couldn't control how her targets landed, making it easy to land on their feet on the surface she threw them to, with proper angling of the body. It made her vulnerable to attacks from outside the room on multiple fronts. Once they forced her to focus on blocking the attacks from outside, the human-shield she summoned had backfired on her.

Kimura's Stand managed to make the back of her neck spit blood into Yukizome's eyes somehow and that gave Munakata his moment to strike.

Kyosuke Munakata wasn't the culprit. It was more emotional than logical; still, Kirigiri couldn't imagine that flash of horror in his eyes as he pierced the blade through Yukizome's heart and see the Mastermind.

He was a danger to Kirigiri's friends, and herself, but he wasn't the Mastermind. But a danger nonetheless. That determination to end Despair, coupled with whatever Stand he had, made her worry.
Have faith in Naegi and Asahina. They're an effective team. Kirigiri told herself. Whatever their 'Sins' were, they'd be able to get around them. These conditions weren't designed for them to only fail.

That was how she knew it wasn't Dio. If someone could have survived this long without a head, or found a way to cheat death again, it would be him. But this wasn't how he operated. This was too fair for him, which meant this was his Friend.

So how did they reach Towa City and collect his head without being noticed? A Branch Head couldn't just up and vanish one day.

Was the entire infrastructure of a Branch of the Future Foundation compromised?

Kirigiri needed answers. Tengan and Mitarai, whatever the risks, would help her find those answers. There wasn't too much risk in cautiously approaching them.

"I suppose your partnership would be welcomed." She said. Tengan smiled at that and Mitarai sighed in relief. Genuine or otherwise, she gave them a false lead. "You knew my father, didn't you?"

"Jin Kirigiri. He was my replacement as Headmaster. A good man. With his flaws, like the rest of us." Tengan said. Kirigiri kept her face neutral, even as he sighed in dismay. "Now we're being made into Dio's tools, just he was forced to be."

"He broke free, in the end." Kirigiri replied.

"As will we." Tengan let go of her arm (finally) and stood up. Mitarai quickly joined him, dusting off the dirt on his trousers. "We'll follow your lead, if you don't entirely trust us."

"The priority should be to find safety for the first round. We've lost a lot of time already and we need a place away from whatever Dio's Friend has planned."

"What about your friends?" Mitarai asked. His voice shook and he was clearly afraid of something.

"I have faith in them." Kirigiri didn't just have faith, although they more than deserved it.

Just as everything descended into chaos, Kirigiri had Detective Man pin Naegi and Asahina down as 'Partners' and Munakata and Sakakura as 'Suspects'. So long as they stayed within 100m, she'd be able to find them.

Tengan chuckled. "As I'm sure they have faith in you. Still, if you're ever in trouble, you've got myself and Mitarai to help you. Isn't that right?"

Mitarai nodded at that. He walked up to Kirigiri and held her wrists, pushing something back, as Kirigiri realised just how loose her gloves had been. Asahina had really come in time for her sake.

"I know that this is scary." He said, Kirigiri feeling her hands move in his shaking grip. "B-But we'll make it through this. We just have to have hope. In ourselves and the others."

It was like listening to Naegi.
If Naegi was nervous, bag-eyed, and seemed more concerned with saying the words than actually believing them. He clearly wanted to raise her spirits, but he did a poor job. If Naegi had that aura that made you believe in him, Mitarai had an aura that made you believe in anything but him.

He barely managed to contribute in the prior fight, admittedly likely only just learning his Stand, which could mean he was linked to Dio.

But it conflicted with what Kirigiri knew. Dio would never raise someone as physically unimpressive like Mitarai to the closest thing to an equal. He loved and loathed those who gave submission easily; loving the sense of power but loathing the person.

On the other hand, Mitarai was always close to Tengan. Maybe an accomplice? Or perhaps simply someone trying to make her feel better. Trying to be a hero.

*He did stand up for Asahina.* No He was no more suspect than the others. Kirigiri had wanted to question Gekkogahara about why Yukizome had kept her in the wheelchair, as Kizakura apparently noticed as well, but that was now impossible. All Kirigiri could do was gather evidence, at this point.

She moved to leave the room as Tengan and Mitarai trailed after her, making a note to ask them about their Stands. Just in case they ran into trouble.

Or in case they became trouble.

---

Naegi began to wake up, now that the second-time limit had passed.

This day had been...something. After Yukizome's death, everyone had tried to scout their surroundings and find a way out. No luck. Bombs were placed all around and the doors were so stuck in place it was like they were frozen. They could do nothing but try and find the truth.

Only, Munakata decided that Naegi should kill himself for the sake of Hope.

Chaos broke out. Sakakura tried to attack Asahina, and did attack Mitarai, and was only stopped by Gekkogahara. Naegi's Sin kept him from running and he ended up having to rely on Asahina to get him away. His back still hurt from flailing around at Asahina's version of a piggy-back ride.

Great Gozu managed to hold off Munakata with his Stand. It at least bought them enough time for Asahina to throw that fire extinguisher for his Stand to punch. The smoke cloud gave all four of their group the chance to escape.

In raw strength, Gozu's Macho Man was probably the strongest Stand Naegi had seen since Holy Diver.

"A Stand that protects is the best Stand I could have hoped for." Great Gozu said. Even with the giant bull-mask, he somehow noticed Naegi's envy. "But don't be jealous. Livin' On A Prayer may not have physical strength, but it was what helped you defeat Dio. To have your words pierce through his Holy Diver and reach those he made into his slaves."
"Yeah. You gotta believe in yourself." Asahina tried to sound happy, but she did a poor job of hiding it. She looked away from Naegi and towards the floor. "I know I've had a lousy record. Sakura, Yuta..."

"Asahina, you can't blame yourself for that. Oogami died fighting against Dio. She died showing us that he could never be trusted and Yuta," Asahina had stayed in her room, crying for weeks, when she heard the news about her brother.

Naegi refused to use his Stand out of principle, preferring to comfort her the old-fashioned way with Kirigiri, Togami, and even Hagakure.

He sighed and decided to speak the truth about her brother's death. "Yuta was a victim. A victim of Dio's madness. But we can stop it here. Even he said that this was the final time. If we just pull through-"

"Dio loses." Gozu said. His voice was firm, but not unfriendly. "The Remnants are leaderless. His Friend is all that's left. We just need to catch them and defeat their Stand. With all four of ours together, we'll win this."

"Yep. You don't have to feel down. I'm sure if they were here now, Oogami and Yuta would be telling you to fight on. Fight on!" Gekkogahara had Monomi say, even having the tiny mascot fly a tiny flag with Asahina's name on it.

That got a giggle out of her. The four of them faced the enforced-sleep with more Hope than Dio probably expected out of them.

He didn't have that kind of luck going into his dreams.

Naegi saw the bodies of his murdered friends, both victim and Blackened, all suffering the same deaths that he couldn't stop. He heard Dio's laughter as he took Komaru's body for his own. The mad rampage of Ultimate Despair and the bodies left in their wake; forced into Despair to prepare the world for Dio.

The last thing he saw before waking up was Yukizome throwing bodies against the wall, roof, and floor of the room without a care. A wide grin on her face as she slowly murdered the people in the room, in a world where Asahina failed to use The Ocean in time, as Dio finally destroyed the Future Foundation.

His friends slowly and painfully killed. No one left to protect the Towa City Rescue Team or Class 77-B from a damaged and chaotic world.

"Morning, Naegi!" Asahina said, the look on her face almost too bright. Naegi had to rub his eyes to get some focus. "I wish I knew how long these sleep periods lasted. Can't be that long."

"If it's being broadcast to the entire world," Naegi eyes widened and he cupped his hands around his mouth. "Dio won't win! We're not going to turn on each other."

"The sleep period is probably as long as Dio's Friend needs." Gekkogahara said. Gozu was already moving towards the door, or rather towards where they piled up filing cabinets and other objects to keep out intruders.

If the Mastermind's Stand was anything like Holy Diver, those defences would have done nothing. It
was more to calm their minds than anything.

"I see the barricade held up." Gozu said to himself. He laughed to himself. "No sign of anyone getting in here."

Naegi smiled. "Yeah, pretty luck-

"OOOH YEAH!!!"

He felt something grab the back of his shirt and yank him backwards. Flying back, he saw the fist shoot forward and slam right where he had been sitting and shattered the ground. If that attack had hit him, he'd have been killed easily.

The source of the blow was a Stand. Its skin was goldish yellow that sparkled under the ceiling light. Dangling from the lower half of the arm were orange ribbons which seemingly had no purpose. The Stand itself wore giant sunglasses with pure black lenses that covered its eyes, along with an orange bandanna that covered the top of its head.

Naegi's whole body turned cold as he heard Macho Man grunt in frustration at the missed blow. Asahina and Gekkogahara were whimpering in fear behind him, as Gozu turned to show glowing red eyes.

"Makoto Naegi, Aoi Asahina. Two of the people who killed Lord Dio," Gozu grunted. He cracked his shoulders and took a step forward. "Nothing will get in the way of his return!"

No. This couldn't be. Great Gozu had saved them from Munakata. He said that he couldn't believe in a Hope that meant killing those close to you. He was Tengan's bodyguard!

Now he was saying he was loyal to Dio?

Is this what he meant by agents? Naegi didn't have time to think. Great Gozu was already advancing on them and they had to be ready. How many people here were his servants all along?

"That dumb slut of Munakata's wanted all the glory to herself, did she? Not like that did her any good." Gozu said. His body shifted to a stance that Naegi remembered from the fight with Munakata.

"Naegi, Asahina," Gekkogahara's voice made the two turn to the girl behind them. Monomi looked ready to fight. "Don't forget that you've got me too!"

That was right. They had three Stand users against one. The one was Great Gozu, and was willing to kill them, but Naegi had faith. He managed to help Class 77-B free themselves of Dio. Maybe all he needed to do was to just talk to Gozu.

Just restrain him and then ask him how he came to follow Dio. He could do this. Asahina had The Ocean and Gekkogahara's Stand. whatever it was, could be helpful as well.

Naegi and Asahina both turned back and readied themselves. Livin' On A Prayer and The Ocean manifested behind them and stared down Great Gozu and Macho Man, who simply scoffed at their defiance.

"Useless! All three of you will die at the hands of Macho Man!" Great Gozu roared.
Both Macho Man and its user charged forward as Naegi readied himself for the first, and ideally last, fight for his life today.

*Dio, I won't let you win. I won't lose hope!*

**Grand Cheri Bois Ludenberg/What's New Pussycat?: Evacuated**

**Miaya Gekkogahara: Dead**

**Chisa Yukizome/Another Brick On The Wall: Dead**

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### Stand Stats

**What's New Pussycat**

**User:** Grand Cheri Bois Ludenberg

**Stats**

- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: C
- Range: E
- Durability: D
- Precision: E
- Developmental Potential: C

**Abilities**

Stand activates when user feels distressed. Whoever touches the user will feel large amounts of affection for the user and have the urge to hold it close and pamper it, even if the user replies with disdain for their efforts, and will be defensive about the user. The target's speech is affected as well. It is unknown if this is an effect of the Stand or if it's the target's way of attempting to appeal to the user.

Target will remain affected even after the user leaves their touch for a period of five minutes, in which time they will regress into moping and pleading for the user to return to them. They will act to defend the user relative to the threat towards them i.e a minimal threat will have ineffectual assaults, and a threat to the life of the user will have them willing to sacrifice themselves.

Stand is cancelled when the user finds someone whose company they genuinely enjoy and feel safe with. Stand does not work on those that user has such affection for.

**Another Brick In The Wall**

**User:** Chisa Yukizome

**Stats**

- Destructive Power: B
- Speed: C
- Range: N/A
- Durability: D
- Precision: C
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**

Stand can manipulate push and pull force within the confines of a room. Targets can be moved in all
directions within that radius, and number of affected is dependent on those who user is aware of within the room. Only works in single straight direction i.e. targets can not be moved in a curve, unless they are in a range of 5m, and must be moved right then up, as an example.

Specific control of targets, such as arms and legs to prevent targets from landing on their feet or moving limbs, requires a distance within 5m. Within this range, user can make targets move in a curve and can manipulate limbs as well. In this state, however, control is broken over those within that range is broken if the Stand is attacked. This does not apply to those outside the 5m range.

Stand cannot control anything outside of the room they are in, although they can throw objects out and can pull items inside if a part of it is inside the room.

**Macho Man**

**User: Great Gozu**

**Stats**
Destructive Power B  
Speed B  
Range E  
Durability B  
Precision C  
Developmental Potential D

**Abilities**

Physical attributes of Stand and user grow stronger when acting to 'protect' those who are weaker than the opponent. If user is attacking those who are not trying to harm innocents, and they are weaker than the user, then the physical attributes of Stand and user decline.
"Dio, can I ask you something?"

"You've never asked anything I, Dio, have been unwilling to answer. Especially during these moments."

"What's the worst Stand you've ever seen?"

"..."

"Dio?"

"You can't define Stands as best and worst. They are like Talents. Yes, there are objectively useful ones, but it's hard to say what isn't useful. Different roles require different skills. I am the Ultimate Master, but my skills in animation and brainwashing are nothing compared to yours."

"It's okay to say you never thought about it...Uh-A-I shouldn't have brought it up. If you don't want to-"

"Get Lucky."

"Huh?"

"The worst Stands I have seen are Stands that cannot differentiate between friend and foe. Ballroom Blitz forces everyone but the user to attempt to touch them. It requires the user to face a group and to activate it from a distance, to create the necessary force when someone touches them. You can make precautions, but it's essentially a gamble that you'll have enough force to cripple an enemy and that your allies won't end up touch you. Safety Dance isn't nearly as deadly; but it's the same principle. It simply makes you dance with the user and controls the pace of movement. It's easier to break out from, but you could only ever fight alone unless with a blind and deaf partner."

"But Get Lucky's user is Komaeda. Isn't his Talent-"

"It's the only reason that Get Lucky works. It's a Stand that fills itself on luck that the user experiences, whether themselves or another, although the user's luck seems more potent for the Stand, and then creates a Miracle or Tragedy. I have an Ultimate Luckster as a classmate and his Luck is different. Both good and bad happen to him, unlike Komaeda who has good luck while others have bad luck. Even then, everyone around him becomes vulnerable. You have no control over what the Miracle or Tragedy is. You essentially put your future in the hands of pure probability."
"So if anyone other than Komaeda had Get Lucky, it'd probably be no different from a rogue Stand."

"Exactly. Just as damaging to them as it is to friend and foe. That is makes it the worst Stand. It's only Komaeda's Talent that makes it salvageable."

"Thank you, Dio. I know you don't always like to talk after-"

"It's fine. Things have been going too easy, and even I need stimulation from time to time."

---

Asahina jumped back and avoided the uppercut from Macho Man's right arm. The Ocean fired another blast of water to block Gozu's left knee going straight for her head. She ducked from the left hook going straight for her cheek by Macho Man again.

*Be hit by a punch or a kick.*

That was the Sin she could not commit. The Sin designed to make her decide between protecting her friends and protecting herself. As if she was just going to abandon Naegi in his time of need!

She didn't care who she'd have to fight, she wasn't going to let anyone hurt her friends!

That was why Asahina was facing down against both Great Gozu and his Stand alone. Gekkogahara's robo-chair (which is what Asahina decided to call the Therapist's chair) had been flung against the wall and the tiny girl needed time to get the mecha-suit going again. She'd been holding off Gozu while Asahina handled Macho Man.

The Ocean really was a great Stand. She didn't know if the Sin applied to herself only, or if it counted her Stand as well, but its fluidic body and ability to make her surroundings act like water kept the blows from reaching her or it. There were a few elbows and knees, sure, but her Sin hadn't been committed yet.

The problem was that both Gozu and Macho Men were walking, talking, and fighting walls of muscle. If anything, Macho Man seemed like the weaker of the two, compared to how Gozu managed to withstand the water-blasts that blew his Stand back.

He couldn't stop himself from getting hurt. Every injury that Macho Man had was one that Gozu felt as well. Asahina's water bullets managed to hit the right knee-cap of Macho Man and forced both it and its user to lean on their left side.

*No time to think. Just do.* Asahina told herself, seeing Gozu and Macho Man ready themselves for the second round.

She was never the fighter that Sakura was, but her friend had taught her a few tricks. One of which was vital for winning a battle like this; out-numbered and out-muscled.

A numbers advantage could be key in a fight, so long as they could co-ordinate and control the
battlefield. You could focus on a single opponent and then get taken out by the other, or you could keep an eye on both and miss out on the minor, and often most important, details about their form.

If you could control the battlefield, however, then that advantage could mean nothing.

The Ocean could only turn the properties of her surroundings into a water-like state at a range of 2m. It wasn't a lot, sure.

But it'd be enough.

Gozu went in for a sidekick and Macho Man for a head-butt, as Asahina then activated The Ocean. Gozu's left leg and Macho Man's head lost their momentum. Asahina gave her Stand a thumbs-up, as it bubbled in thanks, and she got to work.

In the water, she was unstoppable, and the same was true when the air was like water. She slammed her foot against Gozu's knee and used it as leverage to flip and hook her legs around Gozu's neck. It wasn't for the first time that she was thankful for Sakura's advice. Her right knee against his throat, her left knee hooked around the back of his neck, and her feet wrapped around each other to form a chokehold.

She used Gozu to pull herself up and started smashing her fists against the top of its head. Anything to weaken it while she choked the Stand out. She didn't need to kill it (thank God), but simply knock it out.

As she fought with Gozu, Macho Man was in a panic as it crashed around the room, holding onto its neck to try and loosen the invisible noose. Naegi was finally safe. Gozu had been trying to grab Naegi from the start, with only Asahina and Gekkogahara to distract him.

Naegi summoned Livin' On A Prayer and was hanging off one of the filing cabinets as he screamed, "Gozu, please! Just tell us why! Why would you side with-" He stopped talking as Macho Man charged shoulder-first towards him.

The impact of the blow caused the cabinet to cave in on itself. Naegi was barely a few steps away before Macho Man began the chase again. Gozu himself was running towards the walls, with Asahina still stuck on his neck, in an attempt to dislodge her.

Gozu's height was working against her. The Ocean could only alter properties to be like water at a range of 2m, but Gozu and Macho Man were over 2m tall. Gozu had just enough room to move on his own.

The Ultimate Wrestler was now free to fight Naegi, unless Asahina leapt off Macho Man and joined the fight again.

"The same reason that you should have simply knelt at Hope's Peak." Gozu growled. Macho Man tore off a piece of the filing cabinet and threw at Naegi. It just barely missed him. "For the sake of the world. For the sake of peace."

Asahina just had to hold on. Gozu was running out of breath and Macho Man was slowing down. She didn't know how, when it was so strong against Munakata, but she wasn't about to question a good thing.

Too late. She realised, as Macho Man had changed track and was now running straight towards
Gozu. It crouched, jumped forward, and slammed its shoulder into the chest of its own user.

It collapsed down and took Asahina with it. The room was smaller than she thought, since she ended up smacking her head against the wall. Without thinking, she loosened her grip on Gozu’s neck and fell to the ground butt-first. She tried to move back, only to realise that she was against the corner of the room.

With Gozu and Macho Man closing in on her.

*If I could just get in close, I could have The Ocean blast through and then start fighting* - She stopped herself. She had to remember her Sin. *No. I have to stay back.*

Her salvation came in the form of Gekkogahara finally getting up and tackling Gozu from behind. He grunted in pain and fell to the ground, weighed down by the Therapist's mecha-chair, and left an opening. Asahina took her chance and got up immediately. The Ocean blasted water against the wall to give her the force to leap over the two and reach Naegi's side.

"The sake of the world. The sake of peace?" Naegi asked himself. He looked so confused.

Asahina was shocked too. Did Great Gozu really think that Dio Brando was a man who'd bring peace to the world?

How could the world have benefited from Sakura's murder? How could there have been Hope in Yuta dying in the middle of the sea, with no body to find and bury? What world needed them as sacrifices?

Anger took over as she stepped forward and screamed, "Dio murdered my friend! He murdered my brother! Was that for the sake of the world?" She glared down at where Gozu was struggling to stand up again, as Macho Man itself was barely getting up when handling Gekkogahara.

"Wait! He might be baiting you." Gekkogahara cried out. She was busy trying to lock in a full-nelson on Gozu when Macho Man grabbed her by the arms and pulled her off.

If she had a combat Stand, now would be the time to use it.

The Ultimate Wrestler slammed his hands on the ground, making the whole room shake, and he stared directly at Naegi. "Fools! The Great Gozu has never won a battle through trickery and deceit. Everything I say is the truth. Lord Dio had been perfectly willing to spare you all, had you simply knelt. Oogami's death came from her defiance. Yuta would have lived if he never been freed until Lord Dio wished it."

"So we should have simply knelt before him? Let him get away with the Tragedy?" Naegi asked, more confused than angry.

"The Tragedy had already happened! Lord Dio was readying to bring peace back to the world when you killed him." Gozu finally stopped shouting, glowing pink eyes staring down at his hands. "The war had ended. Ultimate Despair would have restrained themselves, if Lord Dio had commanded it. He'd have put an end to the endless war we faced." He said, so quietly that they barely heard him over the sounds of Gekkogahara and Macho Man's brawl.

Or more Macho Man attacking and Gekkogahara dodging.
"Gekkogahara, switch!" Asahina screamed out as she ran towards the Stand.

The Ultimate Therapist was doing her best, but only a Stand could defeat another Stand, and The Ocean was the only one for the job.

It meant leaving Naegi alone for a few seconds, as The Ocean blasted two torrents of water against the fists of Macho Man. It was a good thing that it was slower and weaker than she had thought. If it had been as lethal as it looked against Munakata...

*Naegi!* Asahina had no time to think when she saw Gozu grab Gekkogahara's mecha-chair by the right arm and span in place, using the momentum to throw her over his body.

She barely had time to turn back before Naegi's left arm was caught and twisted upwards, Gozu slamming a knee against Naegi's back and dragging him down to the ground.

An arm-lock. If she made the wrong move, Naegi's arm would be broken in a second.

"Peace was so close! Until you killed him! You rid Ultimate Despair of their head! You inspired people to continue fighting and dying for a lost cause!" Gozu tightened his grip. All Asahina could do was continue having The Ocean hold Macho Man back in a stalemate. "Everyone who perished because of the conflict between Hope and Despair died because of you. What kind of coward inspires people to die, and yet hides safely inside the Future Foundation?"

It was amazing what anger could do.

The sight of Naegi's eyes widening and guilt filling them was enough to make Asahina angry. The kind of hate-filled contempt she hadn't felt since learning that Yuta had died. But that was a wider anger. She was angry at the world, her friends, the Towa City Rescue Team, and especially herself.

This? This was an anger directly entirely at Gozu.

"You shut your mouth!" The Ocean put everything it had into its next shot of water. A continuous stream poured out of it, even as it started to shrink in size, and Asahina even had to borrow from the water already used in the fight. The drops and splashes simply filled up the stream again.

It was an endless stream of water that slammed through Macho Man's defences and slammed it against the wall. Asahina wasn't done yet. She had The Ocean direct its attack subtly enough that it went from just pushing at Macho Man to sending it flying to the left, then to the left again.

Another left, and the Stand-along with the current pushing it along, slammed into Gozu. The Stand went through its user without a problem, but Gozu barely had time to move before the water crashed against his chest. It carried him all the way to the wall.

He took a step forward and Asahina howled. The Ocean turned so that the water would have less distance to travel; now going straight ahead instead of straight and then turning 180 degrees.

"How dare you! You talk about being a coward when you waited until we were alone to attack? You're Dio's friend, aren't you?! That's why you gave me my 'Sin'!" Asahina had lost control of her emotions and didn't give a damn. "It was to keep me from fighting while you murdered Naegi!"

"That honour...was not mine..." Gozu grunted out, doing his best to fight against the current. It wasn't even Macho Man anymore.
Naegi stumbled up from the floor, holding his arm, and looked at Gozu.

"Gozu, shouldn't Macho Man be doing better than it is, right now?" He asked. The Stand itself was struggling against The Ocean just as much as Gozu was. Yet the user was doing better than the Stand! Did Naegi notice something she didn't? "Even The Ocean's stream shouldn't be strong enough to hold it down, but here it is."

"It means nothing! Your death comes swiftly! I will be the one who destroys you for Lord Dio! For the sake of peace!" Gozu yelled. The Ocean's waves threw him back against the wall.

Livin' On A Prayer raised its fingers just as Naegi stood a bit taller. His arm glowed, whatever injuries he got from Gozu's arm-lock healing. "Dio would have never given peace! He'd have only dominated the world and used it as a prop for his own lust for power." Naegi took a step forward, even as the giant thundered against the waves holding him back. "Gozu, you don't believe that. You don't believe that Dio would have brought peace to this world."

As Naegi spoke, Livin' On A Prayer began firing the Hope Bullets out from its gun-barrel shaped fingers. The golden bullets were intercepted by Macho Man; swatting them to the right. Not that it did anything, as the bullets merely curved from the path and headed straight towards Gozu himself.

"No! I won't be controlled by your Stand! You think you save people?! You only turn them into your own slaves!" He screamed.

"Livin' On A Prayer can't create Hope. It can only enhance what's already in your heart. So long as your heart is there, I can reach it!" Naegi took another step forward. Asahina might have been more nervous, if it wasn't for Livin' On A Prayer's light calming her heart. The Stand itself was charging up a shot, this one stronger than the others. "Gozu, I don't know how you fell into Despair, but I'll get you out of it. I know that you believe in protecting others. In keeping them safe and being just. Maybe having to see everything that happened broke your heart. Made you open to Dio's poison, but Gozu..."

Livin' On A Prayer's hands looked ready to burst, when Naegi pointed to Gozu.

"Don't lose Hope!"

The golden rocket fired from Livin' On A Prayer and went straight towards Gozu. No one could stop Naegi's Hope Bullets when they were fired. So long as their hearts had even a sliver of belief in him, Naegi could reach them.

But Gozu was determined to not be reached.

Asahina only noticed that Macho Man had been slowly putting its weight to its right side and slowly nudging sideways when it slipped out of The Ocean's stream of water. Gozu had been doing the same, but to the left, as both giant escaped the prison that Asahina made for them.

No! I'm not letting you touch him! Asahina moved as quick as a whip. The stream of water that The Ocean had been firing ahead split into two different currents and shot towards Gozu and Macho Man. The former was quick enough to crouch and side-step to the right and avoid the water, which crashed against the wall.

That was when a giant robotic leg swooped in and swept Gozu off his feet and onto his back.
Asahina heard Monomi cheer and smiled at Gekkogahara behind her. He just managed to roll away from the water that crashed onto the floor. He was about to stand up when he slammed against the ground again.

The Ocean’s second stream had hit Macho Man and forced it to the ground as well. It collapsed on its back and couldn't move.

The Hope Bullet crashed down on Gozu's chest, even as he struggled and fought against the pressure keeping him down. Just as Macho Man was pinned down, so was its user. The bullet hit and golden light exploded across the room. Asahina had to cover her eyes. She didn't let up on The Ocean's pressure one bit, but knew that they had won the battle.

With a single loud gasp, like a diver resurfacing just before they ran out of breath, Gozu turned to Naegi and Asahina with eyes free of despair, the mask having lost the eye-guards somehow. "Naegi, Asahina, you-

There was a jingle coming from Gozu's bracelet and Asahina froze in place.

The Great Gozu was already choking up, his body shaking in place but fighting against the current pushing down on Macho Man. Asahina immediately stopped The Ocean and rushed over to Gozu's side. Naegi had already moved to his left side and Asahina by his right. The only other sound, other than Gozu choking to death, was Gekkogahara changing her mecha-chair back to its original form.

Asahina lifted Gozu's arm and saw the Sin on his bracelet.

*Have shoulders pinned on the ground for more than three seconds.*

...She killed him. Naegi had reached him with his Hope Bullet and Asahina killed him.

The tears were already running down her eyes and she fell to her knees. This was all her fault! This was Yuta all over again. Another person was dying because she couldn't get the job done. She couldn't find a way to go to Towa City. She couldn't find a way to disable Gozu without pinning him.

*I should have noticed what he and Macho Man were doing. Then he wouldn't be-

A large hand gripped her knee and she looked up at Gozu's mask. "Don't...blame...yourself..." He said, before turning to an also-tearful Naegi. Even as Livin' On A Prayer shined like a candle in the darkness, it looked like it was taking all of Gozu's strength to talk. "Naegi, you freed me...Asahina, you acted in self-defence...if you hadn't used your Stand..." Gozu hissed in pain, before sadly chuckling to himself. "Some protector Macho Man turned out to be."

Naegi leaned in and his eyes regained some of his fire as he said, "That's not true! If it hadn't been for you, Sakakura would have stabbed me, or Munakata would have caught-" He could barely finish the sentence. Even with Livin' On A Prayer, they were delaying the inevitable. "I wish I could have noticed it sooner. I could have helped you before all of this."

Gozu gasped to himself and grabbed Naegi's knee with his other hand. He leaned upwards to face him. "Naegi, you have to know..." Gozu grunted in pain, his grip tightening. "Dio's Friend...I know his methods..."

This was his atonement. His way of trying to make up for being an agent of Dio. The Mastermind
must have told him while planning this out!

He was putting every last bit of his strength into these last words.

"It's...the...mo-" Gozu's voice stopped. His body went still, before his head dropped and hit the ground. They didn't need to turn and see Macho Man.

Stands disappeared when their users died, after all.

Asahina couldn't stop the tears this time. She wept and wailed over the body of the man who, just earlier, was trying to kill her and Naegi. Her friend was crying as well. He kept a firm grip on Gozu's jacket, as if it'd somehow bring him back to life, and she could see Livin' On A Prayer glow brighter.

Does he think, if he Hopes enough, it'll bring Gozu back? Asahina knew it was a fool's hope. The Stand barely shined for a few seconds before turning to its normal state. Naegi was optimistic, but not delusional.

Gekkogahara softly moved towards them, speaking over the whirr of her machine. "We should keep moving forward. I don't think this room is very safe anymore." Gekkogahara said, using Monomi to speak her words for her. The avatar let out a moan of concern. "Are you guys okay? I-I can do some therapy, if you need it. When it counts, I can always make a difference!"

"No..." Naegi looked up at Gekkogahara and began to undo his jacket. He leaned over and removed Gozu's mask, before laying the jacket over it. In death, his face would remain hidden. Just as he'd probably want it. "We should at least give him some respects. He did the same for Yukizome, even after what she did."

Or because of what she did. Asahina shook her head. She wasn't going to focus on what Gozu did in the last few minutes. She'd focus on the man who stood up for her and Naegi against Munakata. The man who spent his dying moments trying to help them.

Even if he failed, what mattered was that he tried. He tried to overcome his past.

He died with Hope in his heart. He died believing that they'd bring Dio's Friend to justice. Asahina refused to waste that.

They just needed to find Kirigiri. She always knew what to do. They'd find her, they'd work together, they'd capture the Mastermind and make them end this evil twisted game.

As long as they stayed together, Dio would never win.

---

"I'msorryI'msorryI'msorryI'msorryI'msorry." Seiko muttered. She kept her forehead firmly on the ground and her kneeling body in perfect dogeza.

The kind of pose you'd take after committing a crime so horrible that only throwing away your pride and dignity would allow you to be forgiven. The kind of pose that represented absolute shame and regret.
Ruruka Andou looked down at the kneeling girl in front of her and smiled to herself. Finally. Seiko was finally apologising for her betrayal.

She had apologised a hundred times, in fact.

What was key to a healthy relationship? Equality. Both partners had to receive something in exchange for what they gave. Communication was important, but only in ensuring that you could fix a relationship. It was no use talking if your partner could hear, only to do nothing about the problem.

Take herself and Yoi-chan. She gave Yoi-chan delicious sweets and love and, in exchange, he loved her back and followed her orders. Both were gave and took something they mutually considered equal value. Together, they created a sweet and pure love.

But Seiko? Seiko gave her medicine for all her problems, even when she wasn't sick, and refused Ruruka's delicious sweets. She denied the very Talent that defined Ruruka.

She wanted me to be dependent on her. Nothing but a leech that she could hold power over. Make it easy to betray me.

Ruruka wondered if that was how Seiko could have sabotaged her in the exam. All without a hint of hesitation.

Why wouldn't she? There was no reason not to betray Ruruka, without having to eat her sweets.

But with my Stand, no one will ever be able to deny my sweets again! Ruruka's Stand was cute, useful and, most of all, sweet like her. It even looked like her, albeit as a massive pink version of her head. Yoi-chan's Stand and mine together, now with White Rabbit too. Nothing will stop me!

First, she had an errant friend to deal with.

"Seiko, you really want my forgiveness?" She teased.

Seiko threw her head up, revealing blood-shot desperate eyes. "Should I beg more? Would that help? I'll do anything, just please let me stay with you." She pleaded, making Ruruka sigh in false-pity.

"No. A hundred times is enough. Not yet, though. I need more from you. Tell me everything. White Rabbit, your Sin, and if you've seen anyone else yet." Ruruka commanded. It was strange seeing Seiko shrink into herself, as if they were kids again.

"I haven't seen anyone. I've been following you ever since..." She trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence. Ruruka didn't want to think about the fight with Yukizome either.

"We get it. Hurry up." Yoi-chan snapped. He sounded curter than usual, but Ruruka chalked it up to stress. Not to mention Seiko's betrayal still stinging.

The Ultimate Pharmacist wasn't helping her case with that glare of hers. It was sharp enough to cut through iron, before fading away when Seiko stared up at Ruruka with adoring eyes.

"My Sin is people stepping on my shadow, and my Stand White Rabbit allows my body to physically alter itself so as to adapt to new situations. I am also immune to negative chemical effects."

Why would it be anything else? Seiko always had a drug up her sleeve for whatever problems there were. Now she had an immunity to the poison that could snuff out anyone else's life as easily as it
did Bandai's. Ruruka could still hear that lousy high-pitched voice squealing as the life slowly and painfully left him. It echoed in her mind while Yukizome would steal hungry glances at her.

She swallowed and took out another one of her sweets. The sugar would remove the taste of swallowed-down vomit from her throat.

It didn't matter if Ruruka stepped on Seiko's shadow or not. All that'd happen was that the poison would enter Seiko's bloodstream and then be negated by White Rabbit. She could break all the rules she liked.

There was a beauty in the Stand before her. Sugar Sugar was cute, with all the bright-coloured dust that could ensnare you with a single sniff or taste, but White Rabbit was dignified. It was taller than Seiko, but the colour of its skin matched her hair, apart from bright green eyes that gazed as affectionately at Ruruka as its owner did. Long rabbit ears spouted form the top of its head and the lower half of its face was wrapped in a mask just like Seiko's.

The difference was that its body was wrapped in this little tubes filled with liquids of all colours. There was red, blue, pink, purple, yellow, green, brown, white, black; all the same colours that Sugar Sugar released, but these were darker than Ruruka's colours. It was like watching liquid gemstones than chemical liquids.

None of that mattered. Not when compared to the most important thing about White Rabbit.

The only important thing about White Rabbit.

_She can finally eat my sweets. No more excuses. The fact that Sugar Sugar worked on her...it's a sign that I was right._ Ruruka knew it. She had been the one who'd been betrayed. Seiko could have eaten her sweets all along. Her fighting spirit's manifestation made it okay.

Ruruka couldn't help herself. She beamed and petted Seiko's hair- just like she'd sometimes do when they were kids- before taking a step back. Just as Seiko was about to get up, she put a finger on her forehead and pushed down.

"Seiko, if you really want my forgiveness, and to be my friend again, you'll have to earn it. Apologising is one thing, but now you need to make amends. Hercules had Twelve Labours and you've only done one. Only when you've done them all can you earn my sweets." Ruruka still needed to find a way to win this game.

Tears gathered in Seiko's eyes and she threw herself at Ruruka. She nuzzled her head into the Ultimate Confectioner's waist; the sound and touch of her inhaling Ruruka's scent could be heard throughout the hall.

"Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou-" Seiko's mantra was interrupted by a metallic hand gripping the top of her head and shoving her off.

"Hands off." Yoi-chan grunted. He stepped forward and grabbed Ruruka's shoulder, turning her around to face him, before holding her in his arms. "Ruruka, we have to be careful. I don't trust her." He whispered.

"That's why she'll be doing the hard work. Yoi-chan, you need to trust me more." Ruruka scolded. She didn't mean it. Of course Yoi-chan trusted her. He had to; even if he was getting a bit touchy.
He could be so protective. She'd offer him a sweet, if it wasn't for his Sin.

*Food touches your mouth.*

*Someone escapes from the building.*

The two Sins that bound the couple together. Ruruka had feared that Naegi would have used Livin' On A Prayer to make everyone get along and try to escape. Munakata, however, was too crazy to go along with that. Dio and Despair had both driven the Vice-Chairman to divide the group; all in the name of becoming Hope.

Everyone thought Ruruka was just an idiot. That she was a pretty-face to keep Yoi-chan around and to sweeten up the new recruits.

Well this idiot was going to have Yoi-chan and Seiko trap every Branch Head they could find. Yoi-chan's skills and Seiko's drugs together, now with their Stands too, could take on anyone.

Ruruka could then use Sugar Sugar to make them all her little puppets.

Forget splitting from the Future Foundation. If she had Naegi, Munakata, and Tengan under her power, she'd be running the Future Foundation! She could make Dio's Friend reveal himself and work for her as well!

*Dio thought Holy Diver would make him the Ultimate Master? Please. My Sugar Sugar is what'll make me the Ultimate Master. Hope and Despair won't mean a thing, compared to my sweets.* Ruruka's Talent would get the recognition it deserved.

She'd stand on top and everyone would do as she said without question. She wouldn't be like Dio. This world deserved love, after everything that'd been done to it, and that's what she'd give it.

Everyone would know how delicious her sweets were. Everyone would acknowledge her Talent.

No one would ever betray her again.

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"A game?!!" Naegi asked. For once, he actually seemed angry.

Where was this anger when he was told of the millions who had died as a direct result of Ultimate Despair? The Kingdom of Novoselic turning from a peaceful land to a desolate and dead region, its people just numbering in the thousands. The survivors who had cocktails of narcotics shoved into their veins by Kuzuryuu?

How many battles had the Future Foundation fought against these monsters? How many soldiers had to be abandoned to avoid risking the lives of the Branch Heads, when hearing that the fallen students of Hope's Peak were approaching?

It was easy to speak of forgiveness and redemption when you were safely tucked away from the apocalypse. It was easy to ask everyone to get along when you knew nothing of the dark secrets
hidden within the school you held to such esteem. It was easy to speak of overcoming sorrow when it was neatly organised into a set of rules where the murderer was punished.

When the deaths of those you cared about had meaning.

Munakata raised his sword and Killing In The Name readied itself. There was always the chance that the 'Ultimate Hope's' heart was stained with Despair, however much people denied it.

That his words were not only hollow, but hypocritical as well.

"A game with rules. Dio only ended it when you revolted and even then toyed with you." Munakata said. He recalled the fight between Dio and Class 78; how different it was to the outside world. "If he chose to use Holy Diver from the start, or put a quick victory over tormenting you, do you really think you'd have survived? Hollow words mean nothing compared to what you have done."

"Class 77-

"The Remnants of Despair." Munakata refused to deny what they truly were, unlike Naegi. "It must be easy to forget that. You only ever saw the aftermath and could use your Stand to heal the wounded and inspire the broken. Never having to decide who to save when Pekoyama's Killing Machine created a forest of metal and hanging bodies. Or if it's worth staying to try and save more people before reinforcements arrive for them."

Naegi took a step back as Munakata took a step closer. "But if we just-

"I finally have what I dreamt of, during those dark days." Munakata finally had a weapon that could match the Stands of Ultimate Despair. Nothing would take that away from him! He readied his blade. "Makoto Naegi, let's see if your words can overcome my blade! Only power can stop Dio and his Friend! No matter if it means cutting down all who try and stop me, or even sacrificing my life, I will end Despair! For the world we dreamt of!"

He swung down and Naegi leapt to the right, avoiding the cut of his blade. Just as Munakata expected. He didn't have to stop the blade just before touching Naegi's skin.

Right now, he was more useful as a hostage. A hostage to lure in those who'd try and destroy the world without Despair that Munakata envisioned. They would come and they would meet their deaths. It would be a heavy burden to carry; murdering those who believed in Hope, however shallow their version was.

But it would stop Despair. It would stop Dio. All of his dreams and designs would die like he did all those years ago.

That was worth any price.

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Juzo Sakakura was a simple guy. When he got his orders, he fulfilled them. He held his subordinates to that standard as much as he held himself to that standard.
Ever since Dio ruined his life, and then the world, he had wanted nothing more than to pound that son of a bitch's face into the ground and never stop punching. He'd be avenging Hope's Peak, everyone who died, his friendship with Munakata, and whatever else Dio fucked over. Get some sense of justice.

But things weren't simple. Makoto Naegi was the one who took Dio's life, and then decided that his minions deserved a second chance. Who cares if it almost gave the world ten Dios, all with their own Stands. The great Naegi felt bad about executing them, so why not do it?

It was bullshit. Hope wasn't just being all fluffy and nice. It was about bringing order and justice to a world gone to shit.

That was what Kyosuke Munakata knew. Peace had a price that had to be paid.

That's why Naegi had to die, along with everyone who got in the way of that. Kyouko Kirigiri was no exception to that rule.

He stood before her with a wheely-chair in hand. His earlier attack had made her drop to the ground to avoid the chair, but it only exposed her to another attack once he grabbed hold of that chair. The gas from the broken pipe had been useful enough that it gave Juzo cover to deal with Tengan.

The Chairman was getting old. It made him slow and easy to get around. Now there was nothing between him and-

"Kirigiri!" Mitarai rushed in front of her and held out his right palm. Behind him, his Stand emerged with angry look on its face. "Virtual Insanity!"

Juzo felt something touch his face as he saw white light gather around Mitarai's hand. He covered his eyes fast enough that he avoided being blinded by the light. By instinct, he shoved the Ultimate Animator back with one arm. He heard a stumble and Kirigiri cry out in pain.

Mitarai must have landed on her. Good. It'd make it easier to deal with them.

*That goddamn piece of crap. Thinks he can save her?* Juzo was mad. Why the hell was everyone getting in the way?! He kept his eyes shut, in case Mitarai tried that shit again, but he had his Stand ready.

"You think you're the first one to try blinding me in a fight?!" Juzo readied his Stand. Just because he had a Sin; didn't mean he couldn't fight. "Knock You Out!"

The Stand lifted its right leg and moved in a circle, kicking everything around Juzo as hard as it could. Left and right. Up and down. Every damn direction but below his feet got smashed to nothing. Its cry began to echo throughout the hallways of the building.

"YOYOYOYOYOYOYOYOYOYOYOYOYOYOYO!"

Juzo couldn't hear or feel anything being kicked. Either Mitarai and Kirigiri bailed, unlikely with whatever injury she had at that speed, or he was just out of range. It was safe enough for him to open his eyes.

What he saw made him wonder if that light wasn't screwing with his eyes still.
Mitarai couldn't even move a goddamn desk! How the hell was he carrying Kirigiri in his arms, bridal-style, without his legs even budging? The girl even had a blush!

He swore that he had hit Mitarai. That shove had enough force into it that he should have at least been out of breath. The fact that he was even having to carry Kirigiri told Juzo that her feet were damaged somehow.

Fine. He didn't need to hit them with Knock You Out just yet.

Some of the people back at Hope's Peak used to say that he was like a guy with a hammer. When he was faced with a load of problems, all of them started to look like nails. In his case, it was a lot of punks who needed a right hook to the face.

This was Mitarai's lucky day. He wouldn't get punched this time.

"You should of run when you had the chance!" Juzo said, as he threw the chair across the hallway. Kirigiri gasped in shock and Mitarai only frowned at the flying furniture.

Kirigiri didn't even summon Detective Man. "Mitarai-"

"I'll get you out of here." He said. Juzo was about to say something when two things happened. Two things that were absolute bullshit.

First, the chair went through Mitarai and Kirigiri. Not as in it barely got resisted when knocking the two out, but as in it went through the two of them like it was nothing.

Second, the floor underneath Mitarai's feet opened up into a circular hole that both he and Kirigiri fell through.

"You're not getting away that easily!" Juzo sent out Knock You Out to stop the two. He couldn't let them get away!

"YOYOYO!" Knock You Out yelled, as it launched a barrage of kicks towards Mitarai.

His Stand was quick and tough. Probably even as fast as Dio's Holy Diver. But it wasn't fast enough. Mitarai and Kirigiri vanished from sight just before Knock You Out could reach them. It managed to completely destroy the floor around the hole, which should have given Juzo an idea of where they were going.

What he found was rubble. It was like there hadn't even been a hole in the first place.

How the hell was Ryota-goddamn-Mitarai running circles around Juzo?!

"What kind of a Stand does he have? Blasting light, intangibility and that hole?" Juzo asked himself. He remembered the report on Towa City. Komaru Naegi's Stand had more than one ability too. "But she didn't have this man-"

You learnt a lot of things as a boxer. How to punch. How to take a punch. What kind of hits at what time could get you disqualified, and what kind gave you an advantage. But there was one thing that you developed that could never be replaced.

Instinct.
Juzo had developed a sense for danger over the years. He developed it in the ring, honed it as head of security at Hope's Peak, and mastered it completely during The Tragedy. No one could step on his shadow without knowing it.

No one could throw a knife at his back without him knowing.

It was the sound of metal firing across the air that made Juzo react. He turned his body to the side and let Knock You Out turn to roundhouse-kick the knife away. The Stand let out a 'YO' and slammed its shin against the needle, blasting it back the way it came even faster than it went.

Juzo didn't pay attention to that. Not when Tengan was emerging from the cloud of smoke that had filled most of the lower parts of the area.

"Impressive." He said. The smile on his face made Juzo's skin crawl. The old fuck was up to something. "The Ultimate Boxer whose Stand can only kick? It'll be a great ice-breaker at parties. Ah, but the important thing is that Mitarai escaped. I don't know what I'd do if you knocked some of his teeth out with that chair."

"I don't need this shit." Juzo bit down on his teeth and sent out Knock You Out again. He wasn't an idiot; he could tell when Tengan wanted him to deliver a beating personally. I'm not playing your games, old man. I'm not letting Munakata down again!

Knock You Out rushed back towards Tengan, who was taking his sweet time, and threw out a kick with the same leg that had deflected the knife. The Chairman hadn't even brought out his Stand yet.

So why was Juzo feeling like he was playing right into his hands?

Tengan immediately ducking the first kick was expected. Him side-stepping the left knee aimed right for his head was presumed. Even avoiding the left leg extending itself into a sharp kick towards his throat was only a 50:50 chance.

Him avoiding each and every one of Knock You Out's kicks, leaving after-images as he slowly moved back against the advance of Juzo's attack? No. Juzo didn't expect that.

Humans weren't supposed to be quicker than Stands. That was the rule. Sakura Oogami had been the strongest person on the planet, bar Kamukura, and she got crushed by Holy Diver.

How the hell is he dodging everything? Juzo had to think fast. There had to be a reason. It was his Stand definitely, but just what could that Stand do?

The right leg! There was some black stuff on it. Right where Knock You Out had kicked that knife away. It was moving so fast that Juzo wouldn't have seen any black stuff on it.

Was that it? Did Tengan somehow sabotage his Stand, or make it easier to somehow take away its speed? There had to be an answer!

Tengan just smiled as he kept dodging the attacks. "Sakakura, why isn't your Stand using its fists? It has those useful gloves on it, doesn't it?" He asked.

The Chairman disappeared. Juzo barely had time to widen his eyes in shock before Tengan reappeared in front of his eyes. He had flanked Knock You Out and was now facing its back.
And Juzo was staring at the cause.

Tengan’s skin, or at least what was exposed on his hands and legs, was completely black. Not a clear black either, but it looked as if he had covered himself in black stuff and it was still runny. The darkness moved and slithered around his skin.

On the back of the Chairman was the top half of a pure-black skeleton in dressed like it was a corporate executive; suit, tie, and everything. Its head, on the other hand, looked like it was from a torture-victim. Four mouth hooks spouting from its lower lips sank their tips into the upper lips to form some kind of gag, as the eyes were covered by a solid steel visor that wrapped around the head, while the ears were plugged by metal caps with chains coming from them.

See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. All embodied in a single Stand.

Tengan, meanwhile, was loving this moment of dominance. He raised his hands and formed them into fists just as Knock You Out turned to face him. Juzo had to make it turn; he needed it to get the hell away from that old man!

"Let me show you how it's done." Tengan then laid the first blow.

A palm strike to the gut of the Stand, which sent the wind right out of Juzo's mouth too. A punch to the right cheek that made Knock You Out's teeth feel loose. This and a dozen other blows rained down on the Stand as it was battered down by the strikes.

That was the cost of a Stand. Any damage they suffered came directly back to you as well.

But they were meant to do the fighting! Tengan was fighting like he was the Stand itself, instead of just its user.

With a final blow to the centre of the chest, Tengan sent Knock You Out flying towards the wall and sent Juzo with it. He flew out of range of his Stand and it disappeared before it could even make contact with the wall. It was a smell mercy as Juzo felt his back scream at the pain of slamming against stone.

He screwed up. He shouldn't have gotten cocky.

Not again... Juzo thought back to the last time he had lost a fight. The man who had ruined his life and made him into an accomplice. Juzo had spent weeks cursing himself for letting Dio beat him. Cursing himself for being so weak.

When he heard about Stands, it took everything he had to not scream right there. Was that how Dio beat him? Or was it just coincidence, and Juzo really had been too weak to stop all this?

He finally had an answer. With his Stand, he could finally see Holy Diver himself from his memories. He could see it touching Dio and healing the wounds where Juzo had gotten his hits in. He could see Dio adding his Stands blows to his own when hitting Juzo.

It was funny. There was almost something comforting about knowing that he’d been doomed from the start. I knew it. I knew you were nothing but a goddamn snake...

The last thing Juzo saw, before it all went black, was Mitarai and Kirigiri cautiously walking towards...
Tengan back in the hallway where he'd been forcing them back to. Before Mitarai's bullshit Stand.

Huh. Story of his life right there.

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"I haven't decided what I'd say to Dio's Friend yet. Preconceptions cloud thinking," Kirigiri said. She had the same calm expression on her face as always. It was like she hadn't been asked what she'd say to the person behind all this.

This was good. It meant she was keeping an open mind.

Mitarai knew that he could have easily gotten what he wanted if he used Virtual Insanity. He could have activated it when everyone woke up and used his Talent to bring them over to his side. Just like he was doing with the world outside.

This was better. The group had split up between those saving Naegi, like Asahina and Tengan, and those trying to 'solve' the case like Kirigiri and Mitarai. The two were finally alone with each other. Tengan's presence would have been preferred, but he had to account for Munakata and Sakakura.

Those two were too dangerous to the plan to be left alone.

At least he was doing everything right. He had studied tapes of the Mutual Killing Game for so long to try and isolate just what it was that gravitated people towards Naegi, and now he had it. The perfect way to win the survivors of Class 78 over.

Mitarai had shown his Sin to Kirigiri the second she asked. She called him a kind-hearted fool, but she smiled as well. Almost like she would have done with Naegi, if he were here right now, and making an observation.

Using your Talent as a Sin also helped take him off the suspect list. If she didn't say those exact words.

He opened his heart slightly to Kirigiri and Asahina as well. Revealed some of his fears and doubts about his Talent and his actions so far. How inadequate he felt compared to the Ultimate Hope. It was almost too much, he almost gave Kirigiri enough clues to tie him to The World's End.

Then Asahina told him to not be so down on himself. She and Kirigiri both praised him for standing up to Sakakura back in the meeting room. The kick from Knock You Out was worth it, for those words. They told him to be his own person instead of chasing Naegi's shadow.

They meant it too. They trust me now. Mitarai appreciated it. It was a sign that they knew that he was fighting on the side of Hope.

Now he could start the next phase.

Standing up to Sakakura had been easy, once he could start using Virtual Insanity. The only hard part was carrying Kirigiri in his arms (and hoping she didn't notice him adding a blush to the illusion) and finding a way to gracefully put her down. He'd been working out for this moment and barely
held her for a handful of seconds.

That was fine. He wouldn't need to carry her, even with her injuries. All he had to do was keeping looking reliable and genuine. Someone that she could trust as much as her friends. A few more incidents, maybe real but safer to use Virtual Insanity and create some 'incidents', and she'd trust him fully.

The stress of knowing her Sin would do the rest.

Naegi was one of her best friends. To be forced into deciding whether to sacrifice yourself or, if need be, kill someone that close to you. It must be unbearable for Kirigiri to go through. It was a testament to her strength that she kept her composure.

It wouldn't hold. She'd start panicking by the third round. Wondering if she could really find out who Dio's Friend is in time, and what she'll have to decide when she reached the fourth time limit. Mitarai just had to keep her away from Naegi and Asahina until that point.

That would be when she'd lose it. She'd show cracks and Mitarai could step in.

It'd be a fake revelation. All they had to do was turn the power off and maybe the bracelets would shut off without injecting them with poison. Kirigiri would trust in him because she'd have no other option. The alternative would be too much.

When it'd work and she saw how he saved both her and Naegi's lives, she'd thank him. He hoped she wouldn't cry. The important thing was that she'd consider him a hero. So would the others.

It'd be safe to show them the outside world then.

He'd tell them of how Dio only wanted to bring happiness to the world. That they could take all the sins of The World's End and erase them. All they had to do was have faith in him and believe that Dio was right.

The affected would already be loyal to him, and those who weren't would be too relieved to do anything. If they tried to fight, they'd be fighting the entire world now.

It was all so simple.

*If I can convince Kirigiri. If I can make her see what Dio really wanted...then I can convince Naegi.*

The two biggest remaining dangers to the world he and Dio dreamed of would be on his side.

Dio's life before meeting Mitarai had left its scars. He shouldn't have immediately turned to violence. If he just used Holy Diver to disarm, turned off the cameras, and explained everything, they might have been willing to listen. If they just knew what they were trying to destroy.

Mitarai had a chance to fix all this. To put an end to all the fighting and killing. All he had to do was use his Stand properly and be like Naegi.

He and Kirigiri had been walking down the hallway for a while now. She'd insisted on going back to where Munakata had...stabbed Yukizome. Probably to investigate the crime scene.

The Ultimate Detective probably noticed something that he didn't. Or thought there was some kind of trail to find.
The doors were straight up ahead and Mitarai tried to open them for her. He put his hands on each of them and pushed as hard as he could, putting all his strength into them.

Not a single budge. Debris must have fallen and blocked the passage-

Kirigiri put a hand on the door, began pushing- slightly grunting from the exertion- and the door groaned as it pushed whatever rocks and wreckage had been blocking the way before. A natural testament to her above-average strength and determination.

What they found on the other side wasn't just Yukizome's body in a destroyed room. It was someone else as well.

He was blonde with hair a similar length to Mitarai's, but he was much older. A thin scraggly beard and moustache, as if he had only just stopped shaving, and dark blue eyes shined with some kind of mischief. The scent of alcohol easily carried over the room and Mitarai felt slightly woozy.

"Oh, hello Kirigiri." Koichi Kizakura said, waving a greeting. "See you had the same thought as I did. Examine the crime scene for clues."

"What are you doing here?" Kirigiri asked, sceptical of the man before her.

The former Talent scout shrugged his shoulders and said, "The safest place is right next to the detective, in these kind of stories. Isn't that right, Mitarai?" He asked, tilting his head towards the animator.

Mitarai nodded. It was all he could do, no matter how unhappy he was.

He forgot about Kizakura; Jin Kirigiri's friend and 'uncle' to Kirigiri- even if she didn't remember him. Damnit! His plan required Kirigiri to rely on him for protection!

It was fine. He was doing fine. This was just a minor complication.

"I should warn you. We're gonna have to stick together." Kizakura extended a hand to Kirigiri's shoulder, only for it to be slapped away. He laughed. "Someone likes their personal space."

"You'll have to forgive me, if I don't exactly trust you." Kirigiri replied. There was no way she could have missed the flash of hurt in Kizakura's eyes.

"Sure. No reason for us to automatically trust each other." He gave a soft, but sad, smile, before sighing. "But we will need to work together. Ruruka Andou can't control her Stand and it's brainwashed Izayoi and Kimura."

Mitarai wondered if he was being tested right now.

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"The young are always so eager to become fanatics. They never realise that the true naive ones are themselves!" Tengan rushed forward as he finished his sentence.
Munakata was skilled with that sword. Just as he was skilled with so many things. The title of 'Ultimate Student Council President' was the sort of thing that people might have joked about, in relation to Hope's Peak, as if they had run out of titles for students. Unaware of what it meant.

In a school filled with eccentric characters and hard-to-control individuals, Munakata was the kind of person who led. The man who everyone looked to for inspiration and direction. People would do what he said without complaint because of his reasoning and charisma. His idealism and ability to look past everything but character was noble enough that it brought Hope itself.

Why else would he have become the Vice-Chairman of the Future Foundation?

Tengan was not so far into Despair that he had forgotten how to pay tribute to a worthy opponent. Munakata expertly parried every strike that Tengan made and knew when to withdraw. His pace was steady and he never too fast, giving Tengan no area to exploit.

The Chairman himself was having trouble with the ferocity of the sword strikes. Even with his Stand strengthening him, he could feel the metal almost cutting into his skin, and had too many close-calls to count. The chuusen's ammunition had started to run out as well, giving him little opportunity to make long-ranged attacks.

Munakata had also been smart with his sword. When Tengan had arrived to rescue Naegi, his Vice-Chairman had used his sword to deflect most of the needle shot at him, having no way to realise what those blades were coated in. His plan had been to slowly exploit this information advantage to remove Munakata's sword.

The problem was that he clearly realised what the game was. He stopped deflecting and focused on dodging; not caring how disorderly and tattered his clothes now looked from being cut by the needles. Munakata's only focus was finding a way to strike Tengan.

Killing In The Name hadn't moved beyond supporting its user's attacks. The two swordsmen were equally skilled in keeping Tengan's physical enhancements from gaining the upper-hand. It was almost enough to make him regret not accepting Asahina or Mitarai's offer to help.

No. Mitarai is too important to risk, and Asahina is needed for Naegi. Munakata would have had Sakakura stay and fight otherwise. Tengan reminded himself. Makoto Naegi could not die yet. He needed to be kept alive for as long as possible, until Mitarai decided otherwise.

Tengan alone still had a chance at victory. The reason was the same as why him and Munakata were fighting to the death.

All that idealism of Munakata's served as a double-edged blade. In times of peace, it'd only be expressed in bringing about justice and order to where he saw corruption. In times like The World's End, it could easily become perverted into something different.

Munakata was so determined to avenge the old world. He thought that if you simply killed everyone who challenged the peace, that would create peace in itself. That Despair, for all its power, could be erased with enough force. That the absence of Despair was enough to bring Hope.

All it would leave was a void. A void that would only be filled by fear of Munakata, after he was done stacking corpses. There would be no Hope there.
It was nothing like Lord Dio and Mitarai’s dream of Heaven.

Munakata, naturally, didn’t see it that way. "Their deaths will bring about the end of Despair. The end of Dio’s legacy! Any price is worth that." He said. The two faced each other on the bridge and stared one another down.

"Ah, so that's how you were able to stab your beloved Yukizome in the back." Tengan mused. He narrowed his eyes. "Or was that the jealousy of a cuckolded lover?"

It was so easy to bait Munakata.

The Vice-Chairman's eyes went blank and both he and Killing In The Name charged forward without thought or strategy. Sheer rage and fighting power made up for it. His strikes were sloppier but also stronger. Tengan could feel the air pressing against his skin as he dodged the strikes. Just as Munakata's Stand gave him another attacker, Tengan's Stand gave him the speed and fortitude to avoid as many cuts as possible, and weather through the ones that hit.

Apart from one area. The lower right part of the his ribcage where his Stand's protection, turning his aged skin dark-black, did not reach where Killing In The Name's blade struck.

The triumph in Munakata's eyes told Tengan what he needed to know. So the Stand's true ability needed a cut to activate?

"Are you trying to make me kill you?!" Munakata's yell echoed through the building. His fury was easily overriding his usual stoicism.

*Answer a question with a lie.*

"No. I'm trying to kill you." Tengan replied. The honesty in his words was enough to make Munakata stop in his tracks.

"You and Gozu. No guilt or lies. How? You truly think that this is the path to Hope?" Munakata's grip on his blade noticeably tightened.

Tengan smirked. "How strange. Your Stand is so reliant on everyone but you being a liar or corrupt. Is that the Stand of an Ultimate Hope?"

"And what about yours?" Munakata countered. Ah, so he did notice after all. "Those black marks on your skin. The substance eating into my blade. Yes...your Stand somehow empowers and devours, doesn't it?" He was always so clever.

"Yes. This is the Stand that I have attained from this game." Tengan said. "Kyosuke Munakata, my Stand is one you should avoid trifling with. You need to be in close quarters with your enemy to defeat them."

Tengan threw out his right arm.

"But you will never defeat Megadeth in close-range combat!"

Megadeth's skeletal form dissolved into its black smoke form as it poured out from the sleeve of his shirt. He'd have to be quick, lest he destroy the very floor he stood on. It rushed towards Munakata who tried to take steps back, but the clouds were too fast. Megadeth ate into everything in its path,
from the stone floor to the metal railings of the bridge, before it submerged Munakata whole.

The Vice-Chairman only had two choices. Stay and let himself be turned to nothing by Megadeth, or retreat in shame and let his Despair overwhelm him. Either way, this had been Tengan's victory.

Now he could return to Mitarai and Kirigiri and do his part in 'handling' the Ultimate Detective. He owed it to Jin to make sure his daughter escaped with her life.

Tengan turned and enjoyed the sound of silence. Megadeth's cloud could empower or devour whatever it touched. Not simply the physical body itself, but even sound itself could be made into nothing when encountering Megadeth! Munakata's cries of pain and anguish would only be heard when he was-

The sound of a man's roar of pure determination and fury once again echoed through the air.

The Chairman turned to see Munakata's clothes in ruins. There were open patches that revealed skin-most of which looked at least partially eaten at- and what hadn't been ripped apart was now stained with blood. From head to toe, Kyosuke Munakata was littered with wounds and scars.

_He didn't leave the cloud. He didn't stay still either._ Tengan had made one mistake, in hindsight. He had presumed that Munakata would have acted like most people when faced with Megadeth's power. He had assumed that Munakata would do the logical thing and run, as if he hadn't always been an idealistic fool.

Instead, Munakata had dashed forward. Probably the second that the cloud had consumed him. The only reason that Tengan had been caught unaware was Megadeth itself eating away at the sound of footsteps!

Killing In The Name was bleeding just as profusely as its user; the wounds stopping neither Stand nor user from swinging their blades down on the now-weakened segment of the bridge. The structure began to groan from the continued assault on it, creaking and groaning slowly and loudly.

All this within a single second.

That might have been why Tengan had been slow to catch the two blades with his hands. He had already been distracted with calling Megadeth back. What else could he have done?

Old age had slowed his body, but experience kept him from screaming out loud when the blades sliced through the middle of each hand and stuck themselves on his bones. The pain was excruciating. The pain was a sign that he was still alive.

Oh well. It wasn't as survival was a certainty.

Tengan shoved his body leftwards to the glass side-panes of the bridge, his weight more than enough to break apart the glass. Even without Megadeth, its cloud already reaching his hands and hardening them, the grip he had on the blades carried both Munakata and Killing In The Name with him.

The battle had gone from one of skill to one of luck. Who would have the better landing? Would they even survive the drop? Maybe something would break their fall.

Tengan smiled at the look of shock on Munakata's face. The fool spoke about being willing to pay a high price, yet he was shocked that another would throw away their own life.
The head of the Future Foundation smiled as both he and the Vice-Chairman plummeted into darkness.

**Great Gozu/Macho Man: Dead**

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**Stand Stats**

**Sugar Sugar**  
**User:** Ruruka Andou  
**Stats**  
Destructive Power D  
Speed C  
Range A  
Durability C  
Precision D  
Developmental Potential A

**Abilities**  
Stand emits a multi-coloured cloud of dust smoke which taste, smell, and have the texture of sugar. Those who consume or smell it become addicted, the severity depending on level of exposure, and the desire to continued exposure overrides restraint and morality. User, and confectioneries created by user, are associated with being the cause of the dust and become objects of obsession for the affected.

Targets will obey commands of the user unless they interfere with exposure. The effects of Sugar Sugar decrease over time, unless exposure is maintained.

**White Rabbit**  
**User:** Seiko Kimura  
**Stats**  
Destructive Power C  
Speed B  
Range E  
Durability A  
Precision A  
Developmental Potential A

**Abilities**  
User is immune to all negative chemical effects within body.

Body is capable of adapting its biochemistry when faced with sudden environmental changes, if the user wills it. Process is not immediate and cannot add more 'adaptations' in mid-transformation.

**Megadeth**  
**User:** Kazuo Tengan
Stats
Destructive Power A
Speed B
Range B
Durability A
Precision A
Developmental Potential B

Abilities
"Peace Sells But Who's Buying?": Megadeth attaches itself to the user and can spread part of its body to enhance the user's abilities. The user is stronger, faster, and more durable with this enhancement and can spread it along their entire body. Doing so will mean, however, that the amount of Megadeth used then cannot be used otherwise offensively and damage sustained to the user's armour cannot be repaired without using another part of Megadeth. Can only be used on self, not on others, and cannot heal wounds.

"Killing Is My Business...And Business Is Good": Megadeth can turn its body into a dust-like state which can be controlled by the user. When making contact with the target, the dust form turns into a more liquidic state and cannot be manipulated by the user. Megadeth lowers strength, speed, and endurance of the affected area and gradually eat into the affected area, gradually breaking it down into nothing, whether inanimate or living. This process takes time and, if the target moves quickly enough, they can shed Megadeth off- although this turns it back into dust form and the user can manipulate it again. User can limit extent and rapidity of this ability, if an ally is hit, but cannot stop the process.
“Ryota, I've realised something.”

“What is it?”

“You talk about how anime saved you, and how your anime will bring about a world of happiness. Right?”

“It's been my dream for so long. To make sure that no one has to suffer ever again.”

“What's your favourite.”

“Huh?”

“Your favourite anime. What is it? All this time, you've recommended films, shows, and shorts to me. You've told me their inspirations and your own. You've created your own anime because of what they did for you. So which one is your favourite.”

“It's hard to say. People judge it in the same way they judge a lot of mediums. Presentation, plot, characters, actions, message. It's hard to pin down...But you deserve an actual answer. It's a Ghibli film.”

“That doesn't surprise me.”

“It's a film called Whispers of the Heart.”

“I think I remember that one. It's nothing like your anime.”

“I know. But it spoke to me. I was a bit older than when I first got into anime, but I knew what I wanted to be and it meant dropping out of school. Focusing everything on my dream. Only I hesitated. I was afraid that dropping out of school would make me dependent on something I wasn't even sure I was good at. The way the other children used to speak to me...it destroyed my belief in my own Talent. But when I watched that film, I was inspired. It told me that I had to pursue my dream no matter the cost. To keep on researching and studying new techniques to hone myself. That you have to make some sacrifices and trust if they're worth it or not.”

“And so you decided to create your magnus opus?”

“No. That came later. It did make me want to pursue animation as a career. School was just holding me back. The outside world itself was holding me back. I never regretted my decision.”

“And why would you? You met me and I met you, because of that decision, and now we are ready to
"change the world itself."

"Yeah. We're so close to reaching our dreams."

"And nothing will stop us from achieving those dreams. I, Dio, will crush them before they even have a chance to get in the way."

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"Makoto's such a boring character." Monaca muttered to herself. She put her hands on her cheeks and, only slightly, deepened her voice. "'I'm Makoto Naegi. I love everyone in the whole wide world. I jack it to Hope. Can't we all just get along?' Lame. I can't believe Dio lost to him."

Not like Monaca was doing him proud either. She was wearing what she thought Dio might wear on one of his casual days; green trousers with suspenders, black cuffs on her wrists, a black tank-top, and a yellow jacket to go with. Grey clogs tapped against the floor as Monaca hummed to herself.

She was laying against the chair she had to drag into her van-ship and typing away at her keyboard. Miaya Gekkogahara was a great person to hijack. Some asocial loser who no one care about was now a super-cool robot-fighter!

Not that others would agree. Everyone but Monaca who saw the idea thought it was evil. Mitarai too, even if he tried to hide it.

Dio would have appreciated it. Dio was gone though, and probably not coming back. Even if he did, it'd not be the same.

"If only it was Dio, instead of his lame friend. He'd never play things out so boringly," Monaca turned behind her. "'Y'know, Monaca has half a mind to open the trap door and send you all plummeting to your deaths. Like throwing eggs from the top of the stairs to make them go splat!'"

She wouldn't do that. If she did, then there'd be no way that she could get what she really wanted.

Yoshikage Kira was weird, not least because he killed her brother, but he was right about one thing. A quiet life was the best kind of life. If Monaca couldn't enjoy a world where she had Dio all to herself, then she'd make her own world away from all this.

The only problem was Ryota Mitarai. Dio's 'friend' and the one who'd track her down to the ends of space, if he could.

His little army were flocking over to the Future Foundation even while she was thinking to herself. Future Foundation, Remnant of Despair, it didn't matter. Everyone who saw even a few seconds of The Eyes of Heaven were now under its spell. Just after the movie had ended, a video of Mitarai gave them their marching orders.

It was all about the world he and Dio wanted to create. The kind of stuff Shingetsu would eat up with a smile. Then he told all the soldiers within a something mile radius to head for the Future Foundation HQ.

Now Monaca was having to race everyone else there and drop off some assets. The perfect way to
get Mitarai off her back.

She wondered if the former Warriors of Hope would show up. Mitarai would want all the Stand users he could get, and would especially want the Stand Arrow Monaca had with her, so it was more than likely. It'd be soooo awkward if she met them again.

*Nah. I'm not gonna stick around for that.* She stretched out and rubbed her eyes. This was way more work than she expected. Juzo Sakakura had (probably) cheated in that fight and Monaca had no way of getting revenge. All those missiles and rockets were for nothing! *Ah well, not like it matters. Not when I've got more important things to prepare for*

If Gekkogahara wasn't dead already, and her replacement now a machine, then it might have been a problem.

"Hope, Despair, Monaca's so tired of that game. Without Dio, it's all so pointless," Monaca smiled and tapped away at the keyboard. She ignored the people behind her. "Once I drop you guys off, I'm off to the one place where Monaca can have some peace and quiet. Away from lame stuff like consequences for my actions."

Whether Mitarai won or lost, she'd be in a place where she could just lie back and play video games for the rest of her life. She had food and water to last lifetimes, and it wasn't like she'd run out of manga, anime, and games that fast.

This was all just a matter of tying up the few remaining loose-ends.

Dio would be disappointed, but Monaca had given up on seeing him again. Komaru's *We Built This City* had either destroyed him utterly, or left a husk, and ruined Monaca's plan.

Monaca stopped typing for a moment. "Before you get too *hopeful,*" She said, the expression on her face so much like it could get back in Towa City; when she tormented Komaru with *She Sells Sanctuary.* "Whether we get there in time or not, it won't matter for Makoto Naegi. Do you know why?"

There was no reply.

"Because, no matter what he does, or who he uses *Livin' On A Prayer* on," Monaca giggled and leaned into the screen. "He's going learn what despair feels likes"

Monaca may have been done with Despair, but the sudden drop in temperature made her nostalgic for the old days. Back when it was just her and Dio readying for the apocalypse to come.

She wondered how Pet Shop was doing.

---

Togami hissed when he drew his fist back. The blood oozed from the scarred knuckles and dripped down, barely heard over the death groans of the latest victims of Pet Shop's rampage. If it hadn't been for Gold, that ice shard would have pierced through Togami's spine.

The falcon flew overhead in the sky. There was no cry of triumph, as its master might have done.
Instead, it flew in a circle around its enemies. Or rather its prey, from the perspective of the beast.

It wasn't as if there was much proof against that view. Togami had brought dozens of loyal soldiers of the Fourteenth Branch (and Togami Group) and half of them now laid dead on the ground. A lucky few had their necks sliced apart by Pet Shop's talons. The others had ice cut through their bodies and heads before the life left their eyes.

Togami had called a retreat after that. There was no benefit having people fire their guns in the air, when that infernal bird simply froze them with its Stand. All the survivors were doing were giving it more targets.

_No use in killing this thing, if the idiot's all I have left after._ Togami glared up at the sky with all the hate in his heart for the beast. The contempt he felt came from what Pet Shop did to his followers, the fact that it kept him from his...comrades, and what it represented. Another way that Dio still haunted them. _How long did he have you under our noses?_

Unlike Hagakure, Togami recognised that falcon. Tenth Branch operatives would joke about their meek leader and his beloved pet falcon who repaid his kindness by tugging on his hair. The sharp look in its eyes whenever someone entered Mitarai's office. How it wouldn't make a single noise, until it saw someone disobeying orders or being somewhere it shouldn't.

He also remembered Dio bragging about his glorious pet back at Hope's Peak- before The Tragedy.

A single look of that falcon himself, and the way it mercilessly cut down everyone around it, brought his memories back. It was one of a dozen recollections, but it answered everything.

Mitarai was Dio's Friend. The one he spoke of in the Neo-World Program. Why wouldn't his Alter Ego reach out to the Friend who helped build the simulation in the first place?

There was barely any time to think of the past. Pet Shop was proving as difficult to kill as its former master. It only swooped down when aiming for the kill and always threw its ice shards before striking. A perfect way to give it cover.

Gold's bullets couldn't reach the heights that the falcon could. If they even hit the falcon, they'd have degraded enough that it was nothing more than being tapped by a pebble. All they were good for was defending against the ice.

_Stalemate._ Togami sometimes wounded the bird and the bird sometimes wounded him. He put a hand to his face and bit his lip in anger. A foolish mistake on his part. Pet Shop had one too many successes and his temper got the better of him.

Togami was no doctor, but a single claw talon was not worth the scar going from his right cheek to just before his antitragus ended. It was a small miracle that it didn't reach bone.

_A scar to remind me of the price of idiocy._ Togami thought to himself. He kept himself from turning his head just west of where he was standing. To a pile of rocks where he told a certain idiot to hide. He was no use to the fight and Togami couldn't protect him while fighting off Pet Shop.

Hagakure accepted that logic and had fled for cover, as Togami distracted the bird. It had managed to freeze a part of Gold's right leg, restricting mobility, but keeping it from killing a survivor of Class 78 had been worth it.
Togami scoffed at the falcon above, not even caring if it couldn't hear him.

"You're one of Dio's last few minions? I don't suppose that Stand allows you to communicate, does it?" He called out to the sky and received a sharp cry in return. Of course it couldn't. Just his luck. "If only Class 77-B were here, by now. Or were at least all awake. Welcome To The Jungle would have helped."

There was no point crying over spilt milk. All he could do was focus on Pet Shop endings its circular flight and heading straight towards him.

A giant shard of ice was in each of the Stand's six talons as it cast them down. They were cast down the second that Pet Shop was halfway to Togami, each one perfectly aimed so that if he stood still, he'd be dead, but also making any retreat risky. He'd have no time to get fully out of the way.

*I've no intention of doing that. Byakuya Togami does not run away from a mere beast.* Mitarai and Monaca sent this bird to be the gatekeeper of the Future Foundation's prison. If he turned back now, he'd be dooming Naegi, Kirigiri, and Asahina.

Gold's arms flew and struck every chunk of ice. The ice broke apart into smaller fragments and were destroyed all the same. The problem was that it barely slowed them down and Gold lacked the precision to break every last ice crystal. Some managed to get into its eyes, blinding both Gold and Togami.

Pet Shop's plan was obvious. An intelligent beast was a beast all the same. A falcon would strike quickly and decisively, using its claws to either catch its prey in its hand, or maybe use the metallic talons to slice Togami's neck open.

A neck so open and inviting.

What better trap could he ask for?

Instinct, just like everything else, could be predicted and relied on. You didn't need sight to plan and Togami didn't need sight to win. Pet Shop's claws had just broken through the first bit of skin when it was trapped in Gold's hands. It was wrenched away, even as it struggled, and Gold tightened its grip.

Togami first turned Gold's left forearm into vines that wrapped around the falcon. It meant that there were still restraints while he did the same with the left fist, wrapping around the entire body instead of merely the chest. Pet Shop's fight was paltry; nothing like its prior performance.

"It looks like the pet will go the way of its master." Togami had Gold's right hand let go of Pet Shop. The right arm reeled back at the at no-longer struggling bird in his left arm's grip.

Wait.

Why did it stop struggling?

Why would the bird that had been so determined and loyal to its master stop fighting?

Unless-

Togami screamed as he felt his entire left arm freeze up. All he felt was a crackling cold that burned so much like fire. The arm then went numb and he felt the cold spread up to his shoulder. The pain
was almost blinding; he could barely see Gold's own left arm fully encased in ice.

He made Gold's left shoulder turn to liquid and frozen arm detached from the rest of the Stand. The golden vines that kept Pet Shop restrained were now replaced by ice. Ice that shattered into nothing when Pet Shop's Stand broke out. Togami held back a scream of pain and anger.

*How could I have been so stupid?! Why would it only be restrained to firing six ice-shards? Obviously, it's power is cyrokinesis!* Now both he and his Stand's left arm were worthless. He let the bird put him at a disadvantage!

Pet Shop was already in mid-air when it threw another barrage of ice towards Gold. His Stand did the best it could with only one arm, focusing on where the falcon had targeted vital areas. Togami steeled himself as he felt the skin on the lower half of his right leg tear off and his left side cut open. It was only a thin incision, but enough that blood drenched his suit.

Togami tried to step forward, only for the pain to make him stumble. "Damnit." He hissed to himself, praying Pet Shop didn't hear him. Defiance remained in him as he glared at the bird above. "You think Byakuya Togami is going to fall to some minor wound?"

He said this, but it was clear who was winning. Pet Shop lost a single talon on its claw. Togami's left arm was completely numb- he didn't know if he could save it if he replaced the arm on Gold- and he had wounds all over. Gold's solid form only exposed him to harm while turning to a liquid form, or even a semi-liquid one, would just leave it open to Pet Shop's cyrokinesis.

If he tried leaving a decoy, saving himself from suffering the same damage as the Stand itself...but no. That bird was too smart, especially when he was out in the same.

*Damn it! Can't I do anything?* Togami gritted down on his teeth as old shames haunted him.

The only victory he had achieved was in the battle against Dio, both before and after his Stand revealed itself. But before then, he had been trapped in Despair of knowing the world's fate, and then of seeing Holy Diver's power. He only survived because of his Stand.

What then? He had been crushed by Komaeda's Get Lucky and became a drugged prisoner of the Warriors of Hope. If it hadn't been for Komaru, Fukawa, and Kishibe, Dio would have returned, and Togami's status as a hostage would have been the cause. He'd even been a non-entity in the Neo-World Program! Nothing more than a spectator in Dio's trap.

He was meant to the Ultimate Progeny. He was meant to be better than this!

*If I'm going to be the man who takes the re-building world by storm...* Togami stood up and drew Gold closer. He summoned all the dignity he could, with a left arm that could no longer move. He was ending this now. *I'll have to put it all on the line.*

The pistol in his back-pocket had been useless. That was what he concluded after seeing other armed associates mercilessly cut down. They had pistols, rifles, one even had a shot-gun, and it had meant little. That bird had been too quick and its Stand too skilled.

Only if he made it get stuck in Gold, get it distracted in repeating the same trick, would he get all the shots he needed.

All it risked was his life. A worthy trade.
His right hand slowly reached behind him, as Gold took up a fighting stance again, and—

"Hey! Hey, you dumb bird!" Hagakure shouted. Togami turned to see one of the stupidest things he'd ever seen.

Hagakure was standing on top of the cover he was meant to be hiding under. He was shouting when he was told to be quiet. He was waving his arms in the air when he was told not to make a scene, and quietly withdraw.

He also looked angry. Possibly the angriest that Togami had ever seen him.

*What is that*- When Pet Shop turned its eyes towards Hagakure, Togami realised what he was doing. He couldn't decide if Hagakure actually had a smart idea, or was just being incredibly stupid.

"That's right. It's me; Yasuhiro Hagakure, the Ultimate Clairvoyant! One of the guys who took out your super-cool Dio Brando. But he wasn't all that cool, was he?" Hagakure screamed at the top of his lungs. Pet Shop bristled at the insult towards its master. "Makes sense he'd have a pet like you. Some heartless killer who doesn't care about anything. Well, if he was so smart and strong, how did I and my friends beat him?!"

Togami couldn't believe that such a plan would be coming from Hagakure. The man was a complete coward (he was shaking when Pet Shop fully turned towards him) and would probably run when Pet Shop swooped down towards him.

It was stupid.

It was insane.

It was certain to fail.

It was also one of the bravest things that Togami had ever seen and he was not going to let Hagakure's distraction out-stage him!

Pet Shop was already half-way towards Hagakure when Togami grasped the pistol and aimed it at the bird's back. It immediately turned with a blood-thirsty gleam in its eyes, stopping in its tracks, so that it could twist its body around and focus its attention on Togami again. The trap was obvious, as it was about to escape.

Hagakure noticed the same thing, and did what he did best. Talk utter crap.

Only why were there tears on his eyes? "Yeah, some great guy he was. Only got the coolest woman I know killed. Yeah, it was that serial-killer guy, but Dio let him out. Now I gotta be like her? What kind of Hope is that?!" He asked. Togami had forgotten that Asahina hadn't been the only one to lose someone she cared about. "Maybe that's why, when we sure sure he was dead. I had a little revenge. You wanna see it? Here goes! Wanna see what Dio had for last lunch?"

How did someone have so little shame that they would squat up and down, shaking their crotch whenever they went down, and still go out in public? 'Tea-bagging' was its name, if he recalled correctly.

Togami presumed it was the knowledge that he was now the centre of Pet Shop's attention. The man
who had refused to go near Dio's decapitated corpse had somehow gained the courage to call out one of the most dangerous Stand users Togami had ever seen.

Naturally, that courage almost faded away when Pet Shop flew straight towards him with six ice-shards all aimed at his body.

"Y-Y-Y-You d-d-don't sca-sc-scare me! In The Year 2525 told me I'd be safe!" Hagakure might have been more convincing, if his hands weren't raised in surrender. They were all but inside his ridiculous hair.

It was good enough. Togami finally had the opportunity to aim the pistol and unload every bullet in the clip, going straight towards Pet Shop, before it could even react.

Hagakure screamed and ducked, as stray hairs flew out from the bullets, but Togami didn't focus on that. He focused on the fact that his opponent had just halved his speed and both its wings were bleeding. Only freezing its wounds kept the falcon from crashing onto the ground.

Gold joined in by throwing out its right arm and firing golden bullet after golden bullet. Pet Shop was too close to Gold to use its usual evasion tactics and could only use its Stand to freeze what it could while flying towards Hagakure. It was already slow from its Stand carrying the six ice-shards, and now it was vulnerable.

But it wasn't dead yet. Why hadn't Hagakure moved? He must have been frozen in fright, if the only movement he was making was with his-

No. It can't be. Not even he's that stupid to put it all on the line for a move like that. Togami barely finished his thought when he saw Hagakure's hands move forward. It was just when Pet Shop stopped to throw its frozen artillery.

It probably never expected something to be thrown at it by Hagakure. He was the one with a useless Stand. All he had were visions that could eve be unrelated to what he wanted to know. It couldn't even work on its own! It needed a translucent host!

Like a very expensive, somewhat-heavy, crystal ball.

Like the crystal ball that Hagakure had just thrown straight towards Pet Shop.

Barely the sounds of cracking glass and an indignant pain-filled screech and Gold rushed towards the creature. The moment had finally come! Togami would put an end to this creature and finally get inside the building. All he had to do was save the Future Foundation Branch Heads and they'd have a chance.

With them, and Class 77-B's support, they could face the entire world and still triumph over Dio's Friend.

Pet Shop had enough control that it turned its body to face Gold. Its beak was cracked in half on the top and a mere poke would send one half falling off. Blood gushed down its skull and yet it remained silent. There was a dignity to it that easily out-did Hagakure's complaints about the crystal ball breaking.

It was still alive. If it killed Togami and Hagakure, it could probably wait until help arrived and it would eventually return to full-health in a matter of weeks.
Not that it mattered. Togami was going to kill that fucking bird right here, right now.

Gold was much smaller than it should have been. The loss of its left arm, and using up so many golden bullets, had reduced its size. A size that could easily be restored, if Togami won.

At the sight of the falcon's Stand, and the single remaining ice-shard it held after dropping the others, Togami immediately had Gold turn its right fist into a metallic disc and fired it forward. The sound of air being sliced echoed as Pet Shop threw its final attack.

Gold and ice clashed and the battle finally ended.

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"Where is everyone?!!" Ruruka snapped.

Was there really no one in the area?! Was her group really the only one in the entire building?!

The most she got was a brief skirmish with Kirigiri's group and that ended with Ruruka, Yoi-chan, and Seiko all chasing Kirigiri's group for who knows how long. They had lost track of them about twenty minutes ago and were left wandering. All to find a single group of three.

It was useless. Kirigiri probably had Detective Man somehow tag Ruruka's group as 'Suspects', meaning either she knew exactly when they were heading towards her, or knew when they were gone.

*Kyouko Kirigiri. If I just got a bit closer to her, she'd be getting Naegi on my side right now.* Ruruka tried to have Seiko and Yoi-chan take out Kirigiri and Kizakura (Mitarai would just fold after that), but it didn't work. There was no team-work to them; just bickering and destruction.

Ruruka had thought that Sugar Sugar's power was making them a bit crazy, so she tried to lessen the amount of smoke it was producing. It didn't seem to work. The Stand just produced the same sugary dust as always.

It probably couldn't be deactivated until she was out of danger. Ruruka wasn't exactly an expert on Stands, even before this Final Killing Game.

Now here they were, standing in the middle of a corridor on floor who knows, waiting for something to happen. Yoi-chan was leaning against the wall and glowering at Seiko, who returned the frown full-force, as the Ultimate Pharmacist stood near Ruruka. She spent most of her time sniffing, for some reason.

"Seiko, didn't anyone in Class 78 explain how Stands worked? Didn't Dio leave any notes?" She asked, irritated at how this was going.

Unfortunately, that just made Seiko squeak in fright. "I'm sorry, Ruruka. The Chairman and Vice-Chairman conducted most of the interviews. All I handled was testing them to see any changes in their bodies, and comparing it to what little notes Hope's Peak left." Her voice took a frightened turn. "Is that enough? You're not unhappy, are you?"
"No. I'm not unhappy with you." Ruruka replied tiredly. She never remembered Seiko being so...needy when they were kids. This felt less like friendship and more like owning a dog.

It didn't help just how bright Seiko's eyes were, just from being told that Ruruka wasn't mad at her.

"Thank you, Ruruka!" Seiko wrapped her arms around Ruruka and held her tight. The Ultimate Confectioner barely had time to react when Yoi-chan started growling.

"Get off her." He said. Ruruka was amazed he was using that voice; dark and guttural and filled with hate. The one he only ever used on the Remnants of Despair. "Stop acting like you're so close to her. You're only around because you're useful, for the moment."

Seiko took a moment to rub her face against Ruruka's fur trimmings before responding. "Yes. Not like you, Yoi-chan. What about your traps? Caught anyone yet? Or maybe Wonderwall has actually done something, in this Killing Game?"

"Don't act like you've done anything of worth. How can we even trust you? Your Stand makes you immune to the poison. Convenient, isn't it? Almost like you could escape without a problem." Yoi-chan said. It was enough to make Seiko gasp.

Ruruka might have said something, if the thought didn't then cross her mind. What reason was there for Seiko not to betray her?

My Stand. She can't get enough of my sweets now. Ruruka couldn't let paranoia get the better of her. No one would ever betray her again, so long as she had Sugar Sugar.

Right?

Maybe that uncertainty was why her voice was so hesitant when she said, "Yoi-chan, remember Sugar Sugar? She can't disobey me -"

"How do we know that?! Didn't you once think Kimura would never betray you at Hope's Peak?" Yoi-chan snapped, making Ruruka gasp.

Yoi-chan never spoke like that to her, even if it wasn't her he was mad at. He had never brought up Seiko's betrayal so violently either. It had always been her who'd bring it up, crying in his arms, as he whispered about how he'd always be there for her.

The look on Seiko's face was one of pure poison.

"How dare-" It didn't seem possible for Seiko's eyes to get more hate-filled. "Well how do we know it wasn't you?!" She howled. Ruruka couldn't even say anything. What was happening?

"What did you just say?" Yoi-chan growled. This was wrong. He wasn't meant to be like this.

"Awfully easy for someone like you to get a bomb into the building. All those traps you love. Maybe you were jealous of our friendship and decided to destroy it!" Seiko pointed at Yoi-chan with her left arm and tightened her grip on Ruruka with her right.

"Seiko!" Ruruka shouted. Partly because she was going too far and partly because Seiko's nails were starting to dig into her skin.
"I don't need to hear this." Yoi-chan walked over to Ruruka and grabbed her by the arm, practically ripping her from Seiko's grip. She barely had time to whine from the scratch before Yoi-chan grunted, "Let's go."

Ruruka was so confused. Why were they being so violent with each other. They were meant to be friends again! "Yoi-chan..." She whimpered.

That was the wrong thing to do. Yoi-chan span around and his hands were gripping both of her arms now, squeezing the same areas, and looking her in the eyes without blinking.

"You love me more than her, right? You won't betray me, right?" Yoi-chan asked, wheezing and desperate. His hold on her only tightened, even as she struggled. "I love you Ruruka. You and your delicious sweets. I won't share you with anyone."

"You're hurting me."

"Let go of her!" Seiko screamed, ripping Ruruka's right arm from Yoi-chan's grip and holding it just as hard as he was. "You just want her love and sweets for yourself. I won't let you take her away from me again. Not when I can finally eat them!"

She felt like a toy. A toy being fought over by two very possessive children, each one thinking that they had the stronger grip, and that the toy would leap into their arms if they pulled harder. All that would really happen was that the arms would be ripped from the toy. All the children would have would be a broken toy.

But she wasn't a toy. She was a person. A person who was being fought over by two people who seemed to have nothing but loathing for the other, just for being close to her.

Ruruka turned left and right, to see Yoi-chan and Seiko's face, and found their eyes gleaming with fury and desire. They were closer to drug-addicts looking for their next fix now.

The fix was being close to Ruruka, and neither would share it.

_No, I don't want this. I don't want them to be like this!_ Ruruka just wanted Seiko back the way she was. She just wanted her to eat her sweets! Now she and Yoi-chan were hurting her. Why was this happening?

It was Sugar Sugar!

Ruruka's Talent was that she could make confectioneries. Ice cream, chocolate, fondants, toffee, and so on. But her speciality was sweets. She could make any kind of sweet, even kinds that most people would never imagine. Sugar in her hands became the building-blocks for all sorts of things.

They could be nice things, like sweets like gave you longer-lasting energy, or didn't rot your teeth as much, that she'd make at Hope's Peak. They could also be nasty things. They could be aphrodisiacs, or give you a high, or be as addictive as heroin, that she'd make after Hope's Peak and before the Tragedy.

She didn't need to pay for things with Yoi-chan's shop, but that would have distorted their relationship. It would have ruined their equality.

Ruruka thought Sugar Sugar was the nice kind of sweets. Where you'd feel all warm and happy
inside after experiencing it. The kind where you'd love it so much that you'd never betray it.

It was actually the nasty kind. The kind where you lost all control and didn't even like it. You just needed it and would do anything for it. Closer to drugs than anything sweet. That was what it was doing to Yoi-chan and Seiko; turning them into greedy addicts who'd tear apart anything in their way.

The dust it was producing, all while having a giant pink happy face that looked like hers, had to be stopped. Ruruka closed her eyes and tried to make it slow down at the very least.

She opened them and saw that nothing had changed. Sugar Sugar was smiling away and didn't even lessen the amount of sugary dust it made.

No...it can't be. You're my Stand. You can't betray me like this! Ruruka was already hurting from her arms being tugged back and forth. It was this, however, that made her cry.

Even the tears running down her eyes didn't make her boyfriend and friend stop fighting.

"See?! You're making her cry!" Seiko hissed. She was the first to let Ruruka go, sending her flying into Yoi-chan's arms. She shivered as he held her, and saw from the corner of her eye, Seiko was filling her mouth with pills. "I should have done this a long time ago." She growled, White Rabbit baring its teeth behind her.

Yoi-chan already had a kunai in each hand when he put Ruruka to the side and took a step forward. "It seems we finally agree on something."

Wonderwall was just behind him; a giant creature with eyes blazing like a black-smith's flame, coated in red and bright yellow flames that were sprawled around the pitch-black. It reminded Ruruka of how Yoi-chan would be during his work. All serious and focused in an land of red, yellow, and black, the smoke almost choking, if not for the mask he'd give her.

There wasn't even an attempt at making peace, or even thinking of a strategy, as Seiko and Yoi-chan both charged at each other and went for the attack. There was nothing but animalistic brutality-especially when Seiko's body had turned into a bulking monstrosity- in their attacks.

Sugar Sugar was pouring out the same smoke at the same high rate that Ruruka commanded when her and Kirigiri's group had that skirmish. She never knew loathing like she did for her Stand. The very manifestation of her soul had betrayed her when she needed it most.

Ruruka took a step back and Sugar Sugar wafted closer to her. It still had that stupid pathetic smile on its face.

She had no choice but to run. Turning her back on the only two people left in her old life, Ruruka ran as fast as she could to somewhere far away from here. A place where she could hide away from Sugar Sugar, and the results of its betrayal.

It wasn't safe. Dio's Friend would be moving soon and she had to be somewhere safe, unless she wanted her body to be at their mercy.

Ruruka didn't even wipe the tears from her face as she rushed down the hallway. Far away from Seiko and Yoi-chan. Her Stand was supposed to have been made sure that no one would betray her again. Now she realised the truth.
Sugar Sugar wouldn't protect her; it would haunt her. Haunt her until the end of time.

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Tengan smirked, "That's right. Your Yukizome, your best friend Sakakura, Kimura, Ruruka, and even Makoto Naegi himself. All of us have been exposed to the power of Dio." Tengan spat out blood with each word. He smiled regardless. "Is that what you wanted to hear?" He asked.

Munakata stumbled back in shock. The bleeding all over his body had mostly subsided, whether from Megadeth or from the fall itself, and his mobility didn't seem impaired in the slightest. The opposite was true for his mental state, now that he learnt the 'truth' about the Future Foundation.

Tengan might have been able to use this as a moment to strike, if it wouldn't be utterly useless. He laid impaled on a metallic spike that went through his lungs, most of his bones broken, and Megadeth was slowly fading away into nothing. All he'd need is the Grim Reaper standing by his side and he would be the perfect picture of a dead man.

*Even if I healed my injuries now, it'd barely make a difference. Not much it can do about lungs filling with blood.* He reflected. Besides, Tengan had been prepared for this day for a long while.

It was something he faced in each battle against Ultimate Despair, as the injuries piled up. He had been an old man even before The Tragedy, his skills nothing compared to what they once were, and he had been relying on the younger generation more and more. More than once, he had to be carried back to base on Munakata's back.

He did everything he could to uphold the ideals of Izuru Kamukura- the original one, not the abomination he let the Steering Committee create- but those ideals were out-dated. The world had decayed and stagnated in the old days.

It was time for Tengan to pass on the mantle to men like Lord Dio and Mitarai.

*Lord Dio was right about you, Mitarai. You'll be the one who carries humanity into its salvation. Lord Dio's return will be because of you.* Tengan let his smile soften into something more genuine than mocking. Only for a moment, before he had to play the part again. *But at least let an old man do his part.*

Munakata was too dangerous to let roam; especially because of his Stand. Killing In The Name would easily cut Mitarai down with its ability. The Ultimate Animator had too much guilt in his heart to survive Killing In The Name's attack. That was neglecting Munakata's skills in armed and unarmed combat.

He had to be broken, in mind if not body.

That was why Tengan revealed a cruel truth, if dosed with half-truths and lies by omission. The Future Foundation was indeed designed to fail, although only after Tengan had been enlightened rather than the precise beginning. All of the people in this building were vulnerable to Dio's influence, but because of Mitarai's plan.

Munakata didn't need to know that, gazing down to the ground as he was. All he needed to know
was that the cause he fought for was corrupt. He was fighting a war he was never going to win. The purpose of the Future Foundation was not to fight Dio, but to gather all of his enemies in one place and destroy them in a single blow. A way to tie everything up without loose ends.

As the man before him began to move his gaze upwards, Tengan expected Munakata's eyes to be filled with Despair.

"Do you think that'll make my spirit waver?" Munakata asked.

Tengan couldn't hide his shock. "What?"

"I am a man who has discarded Despair. Discarded all those who worship it and Dio. If that means discarding the bonds I have made, up until now, right down to the memories, then fine." Munakata said. "I will do it, if it means destroying Despair once and for all."

"Are you insane? You can't just kill Despair. What? Will you murder everyone-"

"Yes. I will cut them down." Munakata replied.

Tengan didn't intend for this to happen. He put all this pressure onto Munakata so that he would break! Instead, he was unknowingly bending himself into something different. He spoke of Hope, and probably believed it as well, but Tengan knew the look in those eyes.

There was a fire behind those eyes. A black Hope that would extinguish all life before realising what it had done. Munakata had not broken.

He merely attained a dark determination.

This changed everything. Mitarai was in danger! Tengan had to do something and do it fast! If he didn't, then everything would be ruined.

Munakata and Killing In The Name readied their blades and charged forward, both aiming for his throat. This was it. He had to move quickly or die for nothing.

This was to be the final testament of Kazuo Tengan's strength. The Chairman had already made his final will, while speaking with Munakata. There were no regrets.

He threw a hand around the spike that held his body in place and summoned Megadeth. He shrouded the black presence all over his body as it gave him the strength to crack the spike in half. The very same dust that weakened the spike gave him strength.

There was no way he could block either attack. That's why he had no intention of doing so. He didn't even think that the spike itself would get the job done.

Megadeth. You will rot Munakata's skull into nothing. We will be the ones to end the old world and safeguard the new! Tengan let those thoughts guide him as he made his last decision.

There was something painless about a killing blow. Time slowed down and yet the body was kinder than it was with pain. There was no need to know that this was painful, because he'd never need to fear being in this situation again. All Tengan had to do was simply focus on the mission at hand.

The spike pierced through Munakata's right eye entirely. Its tip touched bone and just needed a bit
more of a push before breaking through, only he had no strength to do it. There was nothing for it. Tengan simply contented himself with sending Megadeth through the spike, dissolving it slowly, and send it forward.

A skeleton that could not see, hear, nor speak spewed from the spike and its hands reached for Munakata. The right hand turned to dust and poured over the right side of his face, the dust of Megadeth devouring flesh and nerves, and the left hand went straight for the throat.

Killing In The Name plucked its sword out from Tengan's neck and intercepted the left, saving its user's life, but it couldn't do the same for his face.

Useless. Tengan told himself, as Munakata's scream echoed throughout the area, easily overcoming the sound of blood spewing out from his head. Not that Tengan was any better.

His neck was like a broken fire hydrant filled with blood instead of water. It didn't help when Killing In The Name avenged its master's face by stabbing its sword through his throat again. There went his ability to speak.

Tengan crashed against the stone fragment he'd been lying against before and let out a silent howl at the three wounds through his neck.

"You know nothing. About me or my plans." Munakata said, his voice still dignified despite the flesh dripping from his right cheek. It was a miracle there flesh still divided the cheek from the insides of his mouth.

There was an old saying; you can't win them all.

I've done all I could from here. Tengan's message would reach Mitarai somehow. Maybe when he was checking his phone, he would see the words 'I entrust the world's Hope to you' written in blood on the stone. If the cameras here still worked. Mitarai, I believe in you. The same way that Lord Dio does. Your Virtual Insanity is unstoppable here. So long as you discard your Sin, you'll win any fight. The new generation...will only know Hope and happiness...thanks to Lord Dio and you.

"Heaven," He whispered to himself. There was no sound, but he knew the words. Mitarai had told him about the world he and Lord Dio had dreamed of. "I wish I could see it for myself."

Who said he wouldn't? If Lord Dio could be reborn, as Mitarai said he could, then why couldn't Tengan be reborn? Holy Diver could revive the dead, and Lord Dio was supposedly destined to receive an even greater Stand, when this was all over.

With that, even as darkness surrounded him entirely, Tengan could face death with a smile. Who said this was the end?

After all, Lord Dio worked in many ways.

And so, Kazuo Tengan: former Headmaster of Hope's Peak Academy, Chairman of the Future Foundation, and loyal servant to Dio Brando, died.
Seiko Kimura stalked the hallways, her ears finely attuned to hear even the softest steps from another person, and searched for her prey.

This was Izayoi’s fault. If he hadn't distracted her with Wonderwall, she might have been able to take Ruruka and run. Instead, she was stuck having to play catch-up with the Ultimate Blacksmith. All because he managed to throw a few more barriers in her way.

The walls of the hallway had been wrenched from their original place to form a series of gates for Seiko to break through. Sometimes he even messed with the designs so that there were pieces of metal jutting out. He made them so sharp that you could barely look at them without being cut.

He had underestimated White Rabbit. It was easy for Seiko to contort her body and slither through the cracks. Izayoi forgot the price of having to pull the walls out; you eventually tore out a piece of it. No matter small it was, Seiko could make her way through it.

Her body even adapted so that her pain receptors didn't react to her body changing itself to an almost-liquid state.

That was why she could roam free while others slept. Her Stand made her immune to the Mastermind's poison and now no one would stop her from finding Ruruka.

*I'll find her. I'll find Ruruka and I'll make her all mine. I won't share her sweets with anyone!* Seiko thought, as she ran down the hallways. As for tracking her best friend, she could follow her scent fine. Sugar Sugar's dust left a slight trace that even Izayoi could follow, his sense of smell nothing compared to Seiko’s.

The problem with sensitive ears, however, was that they were good for long-distance hearing and terrible when there was a sharp noise close to you.

That noise was the sound of the TV monitors flickering on. Specifically, the monitors surrounding her just where the hallways broke into three paths, including the one behind her. It was surround-sound torture.

The static noise making Seiko pause and hold onto her ears as White Rabbit hissed in pain and anger. In a matter of seconds, her ears went back to their normal state of hearing ability and the noise was bearable again.

Nothing could prepare her for seeing Dio Brando's satisfied grin on the monitor above her.

"Seiko Kimura. To think that one of the Future Foundation's silent saviours was secretly an agent of Dio. Munakata thought he'd been the one to reach out, after she had been expelled, but it was actually I, Dio!" He declared. Seiko could hear this voice fine, despite the jar his head was in. How was that even possible?

And what was he talking about? "What are you-I'm not one of your agents!"

"You seem surprised. Why wouldn't you be? But allow me to explain something." Dio said. His voice turned softer, as if he was playing his role in the Mutual Killing Game again; pretending to be a friend. "This game isn't being broadcast to the world. This entire thing was simply a way to keep you all distracted while the real work happened outside. As additional insurance, however, I needed to keep conflict going. That's where you come in."
At that, the screen changed. Dio's head had been replaced by a strange pattern. It was a collection of shining bright lights that all danced with each other. Seiko could only compare it to a kaleidoscope that was repeating the same pattern, yet the design made it seem infinite. The lights kept going out and out and out and out.

Seiko felt her eyes draw themselves in and her mind calm. The lights were welcoming and comforting; an oasis of normality and beauty in an ugly world of betrayal and death.

"Seiko Kimura. Dio and I will never betray you. We'll never want you to feel like we don't appreciate you. The drugs you create are amazing. They've saved so many lives and helped so many people." Seiko recognised Mitarai's voice and smiled. He was so kind to say that about her. "So Seiko, wouldn't a world of happiness be for the best? A world where everyone knows their fate, so never know fear or uncertainty. You'll help us create it, won't you?"

If Seiko had been in a world of certainty, she would have never let her fear of Ruruka just taking advantage of her ruin their friendship. Ruruka would have never questioned how poisonous sugar could be to her. They had a wonderful friendship destroyed by fear and uncertainty.

Hope's Peak exiled them because they were uncertain about whose fault it was. It was easier to remove them than it was to question what happened. Three lives almost ruined and without Hope, all because of that.

Was that a world of Hope?

All this time, she had been fighting for Munakata and what she thought was right. She thought Dio and Despair were diseases to be purged.

But what if they were a vaccine? Introduce a small amount of sickness to create an immunity. Had she simply been fighting against Hope this whole time?

Was she fighting against a world where her body itself wouldn't need constant medicine to stay alive?

What had she done? Seiko fell to her knees and wept, but not from Despair. No. She couldn't feel Despair; because she had finally seen the true path to Hope. Thank you, Mitarai. I can make amends now. I can make sure Ruruka becomes a loyal servant of Lord Dio as well.

All she needed to do was handle Izayoi, maybe just cripple him, and then Ruruka could be captured and shown this revelation as well. She'd resist at first. Only until she saw what Seiko saw!

Then she would find new purpose. She would realise the evils of the old world and the fruits of Heaven that Lord Dio and Mitarai would bring. Ruruka would have her best friend back and be able to live in a world without fearing betrayal. Where everyone would love her and her delicious sweets.

The two would be friends in Heaven.

*Lord Dio, Ruruka; the two most important people in my life.* Seiko breathed in and looked ahead. She dashed forward to where she knew Ruruka was heading, moving with a sense of purpose she never knew before. *I won't fail you this time!*

She would save Ruruka, or die trying!
"Is there any reason that you still insist on following us?" Kirigiri asked. It was hard to tell if she was irritated by Kizakura, or simply curious.

"I'm not following you. We just happen to be walking in the same direction. Besides, we need to work together, if we want to avoid being Ruruka's next victims." Kizakura replied. He didn't seem bothered at all by Kirigiri's apathetic displeasure.

Mitarai was nervous. He expected that Kizakura would have confronted Kirigiri at some point, but he didn't think it'd have been so soon. There was meant to have been more time for him to use Virtual Insanity on Kirigiri.

Now he could only use it when he was sure Kizakura wasn't paying attention. The tendency to drink and his really unprofessional methods aside, Kizakura was an observant guy. It'd be harder to fool both him and Kirigiri at the same time.

The only time he managed to look heroic since then was when they accidentally encountered Andou's group. They were at a junction in the hallways where they could have gone in three directions, only for Kimura and Izayoi to catch-up and expose them to Sugar Sugar. Kirigiri finally looked scared and Kizakura had been reluctant to throw out his Stand. Mitarai finally had a chance to look heroic.

He had took Kirigiri by the hand and led her back the way they came, whilst Virtual Insanity made it appear like they were running in the opposite direction. Kirigiri didn't even seem bothered by how grabby Mitarai had been. Kizakura certainly teased him about it.

It might have been because Andou's Stand was so dangerous. She was focusing on the bigger picture.

*Smell and taste. That's how she gets them.* Mitarai thought. It reminded him a bit of Virtual Insanity's true power, if he wasn't trying to present himself as another victim of this game. Andou's was different. She had no control over her Stand and didn't even seem to realise it.

Dio would have called it a bad Stand. A Stand that couldn't discern between friend or foe and free from even the user's control. A rogue Stand could be worse than no Stand, in these fights. Control was key to making it mean something.

It was why Holy Diver was so powerful. Dio had perfect control over its ability to overwrite effect. Mitarai remembered how Dio would talk about how strong Virtual Insanity was, just because Mitarai had so much control over the illusions he could create.

But there was one thing more dangerous to Mitarai's plan than a rogue Stand-user chasing them. It was a Stand-user claiming to be an ally, who also refused to reveal what their Stand was.

A Stand-user like Koichi Kizakura.

His only relief was that Kirigiri didn't seem happy when Kizakura kept pestering her. "It doesn't hurt to emote a bit more." He said, as they walked along. Kirigiri stopped in her track and let out a deep sigh of mild frustration. "That's it!"
"Is there a point to the constant conversation?" Kirigiri asked. She ignored Kizakura's soft enthusiasm.

Kizakura shrugged his shoulders. "Just making small talk. I suppose, as the detective, you already have ideas of suspects. Andou? Gekkogahara?"

"Gekkogahara is suspect, but I lack concrete proof, and we both know that Andou is clearly not in control of her Stand. Dio wouldn't allow something like Sugar Sugar, if he could help it." Kirigiri replied. It was almost scary how her brain worked.

"Holy Diver could have protected him."

"He'd have to be touching himself around her constantly. He'd see that as an annoyance." Kirigiri turned to Mitarai when she saw Kizakura chuckle. If she wanted support, all she'd get was a very red face and and eyes very interested in the floor. "What?"

"It's nothing. Though it sounds like you still think it could be anyone." Kizakura said, only making Kirigiri sigh again.

"I have people I suspect more than others. I'm also ill-equipped for a murder-less mystery so far. Regardless, I'm not ready to write someone off as the Mastermind yet." She concluded. A look at Mitarai and then she turned back to Kizakura.

Good. That meant she still believed in him and hadn't figured out the Mastermind yet. The fact that she only looked at the monitors every now and then, rather than anything in-depth, told him that she hadn't figured out his methods yet.

When this game was finally over, at least half of the Future Foundation would already be saved. All thanks to the monitors.

Gozu's death...that was a tragedy. No one was meant to die. Not even Yukizome. If things had gone entirely to plan, when Gozu was brainwashed, Naegi and Asahina would have been captured and one of them now would be loyal to Dio.

Instead, another sin would have to be erased when Dio reached Heaven.

They were already past the third time-limit. The distraction seemed to be rushing by so quickly. Pet Shop was probably bored waiting outside with Togami and Hagakure disabled (ideally without killing them) and Mitarai's army would be arriving soon. It wouldn't be long until the fourth round came along and Kirigiri's Sin would activate.

Virtual Insanity disguised the sound and sight of Mitarai pulling out his phone and seeing how the game was progressing. A few clicks and he could the camera feeds of the monitors that had switched on while everyone but himself and Kimura were asleep. He wanted to know where she was.

He smiled when he saw that she had been saved as well. A strong fighter like her could only make things easier.

A few more clicks and he arranged for the next brainwashing to occur before everyone went to sleep. It was a risky move; if someone realised the twist to this game and weren't brainwashed, then he'd be caught out. If it meant Andou being saved through...
Sugar Sugar on his side would at least have some direction. He could even save more people and avoid another Gozu incident. Mitarai had to take risks, if it meant maximising the survival rate. *Otherwise, what was the point? I could have just killed them earlier. The point is to save them.*

With that, Mitarai put the phone away into the free inside pocket of his blazer- it was strange how the weapons that could change the world were on his clothes- and paid attention to the group again. They knew where they were going. They were heading down to the basement, searching for victims.

Kirigiri still led with a clear head. If she was worried about her Sin, she wasn't showing it. Kizakura was probably behind it; memories locked away in Kirigiri's mind expressing themselves in self-comfort. At least, that was Mitarai's guess.

Kizakura was still having fun chatting with Kirigiri.

"My friend was never all that fond of detectives. You'd probably dislike him." He said, with a wry smile. Kirigiri simply hummed in agreement.

"I'm sure I would. But that's not the point right now. You realise that refusing to reveal your Stand makes you suspect, right?" She said. Detective Man emerged behind it and slowly raised its pistol.

Kizakura raised his hands in surrender, but remained perfectly calm. "There's a lot of Stands that can be suspect. Maybe my Stand's power is evil. Something that'd make you cry and think I'm Dio's Friend."

"I've yet to see proof that Stands can be evil on their own. They reflect the user, rather than anything else." Kirigiri replied.

The two then just kept on talking while Mitarai skulked behind. The 'hero' was supposed to be more conversational than this, but Mitarai wasn't used to socialising this much. He had expected that he'd be the default for Kirigiri, but now she had a choice.

He'd have to act soon. He needed to regain control of the plan and that meant getting Jin Kirigiri's friend away from Kirigiri. Or at least break the trust between them.

*Maybe...If I use Virtual Insanity,* Mitarai had given himself a Sin, but there was no poison in his bracelet. There was nothing to stop him from truly using Virtual Insanity. *It's against my rules for this...but Dio always said rules were made to be broken.*

Virtual Insanity sat on Mitarai's right shoulder and the cube surrounding it slowly expanded to cover the entire hallway. Mitarai would have to be careful about these illusions. Having people see different things was a trick he barely had practice with.

But he just needed to create the right-

"Help! Someone, please! Help me!"

Virtual Insanity's illusion immediately disguised it as Mitarai, Kirigiri, and Kizakura span around at the sound of that cry for help. All three of them recognised that voice. The difference was that what was once triumphant had turned desperate.

Andou was running down the hallway, eyes flaring with hatred, as she turned her head back and screamed, "Get away! Get away from me!" The object of her hatred slowly floated towards her. It
was Sugar Sugar itself. "You betrayed me! My own Stand...you made them into monsters!"

Sugar Sugar had finally backfired on her.

Kirigiri had predicted that Izayoi and Kimura's affection for Andou would devolved into an obsession. The two would tear each other, and Andou, apart to have her all to themselves. It made sense that she'd try to run away, even if the chances of escaping with her bracelet still on were nil.

This was it. Fate had saved Mitarai from having to break the rules.

He could play the hero.

Kirigiri looked shocked when he cupped his hands around his mouth and screamed out, "Andou! We're over here!" She heard his words and gazed at the three as if they were the gates of heaven. Still, she didn't move an inch closer.

"Mitarai, this could be a trap. You can't just invite her over. If she's even telling the truth, she's a danger regardless." Kirigiri said. Her face remained neutral as ever, making it impossible for him to read her. He just had to have faith in her moral compass.

"We can't just abandon her. She's a Branch Head of the Future Foundation. Hope can't benefit if we all turn on each other." Mitarai turned to face Kirigiri and looked her right in the eye. His eyes were determined, but also pleading. Just like Naegi's always were. "We have to work together, if we want to stop Despair. So, please, trust me on this."

"I don't wanna hurt you. I can control it!" Andou cried out. Her voice wavered when she added, "Kind of. If I try really hard, I can make it only produce a tiny bit of the dust now..."

Kizakura at least sounded positive when he said, "Better she's on our side than against. If only we had a way of knowing if she was telling the truth or not."

"Andou, tell us exactly what happened." Kirigiri said. Detective Man was right behind her, its pistol's barrel resting on her right shoulder, as it hid using its own user's body as cover. Andou had no way of seeing it, from her distance.

Mitarai felt a pang on guilt in his heart when he turned around again and saw the look on Andou's face. Tears ran down her face, ruining whatever make-up she had on, and her legs were shaking and covered in wounds. As if she had been running for so long that she didn't even stop moving after tripping. Had she even been running just before the sleeping poison took effect?

This wasn't the Despair that gave the Remnants strength. This was the Despair that made you crawl into a ball and want to die.

Andou hiccuped as she said, "I wanted to use Sugar Sugar to have everyone on my side- so no one would try to kill me- and it worked! Seiko finally apologised and would finally eat my sweets! But it was wrong. This Stand- stupid and dumb and evil and manipulative- turned against me. It infected Yoi-chan and it drove him and Seiko crazy. They don't care about me, they just care about being able to be near my scent and taste. The scent and taste of sweets."

She couldn't control herself anymore. Whether from the weight of her emotions, or just exhaustion, she collapsed onto her knees.
"The real Yoi-chan would never hurt me. He loved me. He loved my sweets too. Not just because they were delicious; but because they were mine. I put myself into each one of them. He'd never hurt me before...I ruined him! I betrayed him!" She howled, hitting herself on the head with her balled-up fists.

The only reason Mitarai didn't try to comfort her was the fact that Sugar Sugar was now hovering just above her. The multi-coloured sugary dust that the giant pink head emitted was too dangerous to get close to.

At the very least, they knew she was telling the truth. Detective Man fired its Truth Bullets and they struck Andou again and again with no effect. They were transparent but, if Andou had been lying, they'd have turned into the physical manifestation of her words and pierced the body-parts where the bullets had hit.

I've got to watch out for that ability. Mitarai thought to himself. He then focused on more important matters; comforting Andou.

Kizakura beat him to the punch, speaking in a more dour tone, when he said, "Andou, I know how it feels when your friends get hurt. When you can't do anything to help them." Kizakura was talking about Jin, but even Mitarai's body sagged at those words when reminded of his failures. Andou gazed up with hope in her eyes. "Why don't you join us? We're finding out whose behind all this. Maybe we'll find out who Dio's Friend is and make him fix all this." He offered, although Kirigiri looked like she had something to say about that.

"Sugar Sugar probably doesn't last forever. If you tell us what their Stands can do, maybe we'll find counters. If they're captured, they won't be able to hurt anyone." Mitarai added.

"I know a place. It's a small room, but we can hide out there until the next time limit." Andou sounded so desperate for help. It was hard not to pity her.

It might have even been why Kirigiri agreed to let Andou lead them to the room she had found. From what she had said, it was the decoy room that Tengan had designed to raise hopes, only to reveal the truth about this whole place. That this wasn't the building they thought it was.

The reason the windows were all blocked off wasn't because the blast shields were up, but because they were deep into the underground sections. The bunkers where the Branch Heads were supposed to hide and/or make a final stand, if Ultimate Despair broke in. Not that they'd have ever reached that point, if Dio won at Hope's Peak.

As the group of four, Andou far-behind to keep Sugar Sugar from brainwashing the others, it became apparent that time wasn't on Mitarai's side anymore. He had to hurry this up. It wouldn't be long before the fourth round would come about.

He needed to show Kirigiri that he could be the Ultimate Hope as well. He needed her to see that Naegi was useless in situations like these. All he could do was talk and, if people didn't want to listen, that was worthless.

People weren't as strong as the Naegi siblings. They were weak to Despair and were afraid of certainty. They needed to be nudged into Hope.

Mitarai looked at his phone again and saw something that calmed his mind. It looked like Kimura was closing in on their location and fast. Izayoi wasn't too far behind, but the Ultimate Pharmacist
would easily reach them in time.

As for dividing the group itself, Mitarai could reveal the 'escape passage' and let Andou's paranoia do the work for him. It was simple. Have everyone argue until Kimura arrived, use Virtual Insanity and lure Kirigiri out, and then he could get thing back to how they were meant to be.

Izayoi was even close by to Kimura. The more chaos, the better. Ideally, Kizakura would escape on his own, while Izayoi and Kimura fight over Andou. It wouldn't be long until Mitarai could get Kirigiri alone and save her from her Sin.

He grimaced when he saw Sakakura closing in on the area. He was even closer than Kimura was.

You're being paranoid, Mitarai, He told himself. What're the odds of him actually finding us? It's not like he can stand up to Virtual Insanity anyway.

Peace of mind. Mitarai just had to keep peace of mind and everything would be fine.

Kazuo Tengan/Megadeth: Dead

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Stand Stats

Killing In The Name
User: Kyosuke Munakata
Stats
Destructive Power A
Speed A
Range D
Durability B
Precision A
Developmental Potential C

Abilities
Stand acts as a companion fighter with its blade.

Its abilities activate when making a cut on a living being with its blade. User can ask the target questions and another cut emerges on the body of the target if they answer with a lie, or hold guilt in their hearts about their answer. The severity of the cut depends on the extent of the lie and/or guilt. No additional wound emerges if the target answers with the truth and has no guilt in their heart. There is no limit to how many times the user may use this ability, so long as they can directly speak to the target, until all cuts on the target are healed.

Wonderwall
User: Sonosuke Izayoi
Stats
Destructive Power B
Speed B
Range C
Durability A
Precision B
Developmental Potential B

Abilities
User is capable of manipulating 'hardness' and cutting power of any metallic object that it touched by the user or the Stand. Effect lasts until the object is broken or the user reverts it to its original state.
"Dio, you know I'd never betray you, right?"

"I've never doubted you, after that day. Why do you ask this now, Ryota?"

"...Please don't do it."

"You know about the journey I wish to take the Warriors of Hope on."

"It can't be Hope. I understand why you did what you did with my classmates. I even sort-of understand why you treat them like you do. It gives them Despair, which makes them happy. But...this-"

"Ryota, what do you know about the Warriors of Hope? Other than what I've told you."

"They're children. Children who'd have killed themselves if you hadn't arrived and showed them another way. You gave them Stands and told them about Heaven. The world of happiness you want to create."

"Do you know why they wanted to kill themselves?"

"Their parents were abusive."

"...Perhaps I, Dio, have sheltered you too much. You've been in this room for months now and it's kept you safe and focused on our work. At the same time, you've forgotten how cruel and despairing the world can be. Ryota, you are so much like Hope. Trusting but fragile as well."

"What are you saying?"

"I want you to come with me, Ryota. When the Warriors of Hope overcome their Despair and cut off all ties to their past, I want you to be there to witness it. I want you to understand the Despair they've endured. The Despair that Dio rescued them from."

"...Okay. I'll do it. I wouldn't be much help in creating Heaven if I just looked away from Despair. No matter how hard it is, I'll listen to understand why they have to kill their parents."

"Good, Ryota. I can always trust you."

"And I can trust you too. I know, Dio. Everything that we've done. Everything you'll have to do. It's all for that better world. A world without sadness, pain, or violence."
“That's why we are righteous, Ryota. I, Dio, will rule over this world and all shall be right within it.”

---

Juzo wasn't the smartest guy you'd ever meet.

That title belonged to Munakata; who had the weird fucking power to know everything about everything. Academics, physicality, and a whole lot of other stuff, he could just list off the facts no problem. Yukizome used to tease him about how she'd feel dumb if he were anyone else.

Happier times. That wasn't the point of his remembering though.

What he was remembering was Munakata telling Sakakura about why one of the latter's opponents had been so dumb to exercise while upside-down. Not just because he was only doing to impress some chicks.

See, the human body adapted to certain things. Gravity, for example. The force that kept people stuck on the ground naturally did stuff to the way the body circulates blood. Human are adaptable, so the body works well with gravity as it is, so long as both stay relatively similar. Gravity doesn't lessen or grow, and the human body stays in the direction it normally is.

Go upside down- and not just for a second like on a roller-coaster- and that all changed.

The blood was now being pushed the wrong way. What was down was now up and what was up was now down and the blood would go to the wrong places. Not enough of it to your legs and too much to the lungs and brain. The heart then has to work harder to keep the blood-flow stable and your senses start screwing up because everything's going in the opposite direction.

Why was Juzo listing medical trivia?

It might have something to do with the fact that he, along with Kirigiri, Kizakura, Mitarai, and Andou, were all standing on the ceiling. They were all upside down because of Mitarai's goddamn Virtual Insanity.

The atmosphere of the room changed then. Like a guy who's making a speech can go from calm and composed to a sweaty and stuttering mess just by looking at an unimpressed audience. The mood of the room could change someone entirely, if it went in a certain way.

Juzo's mind was telling him the exact same thing. 'Holy shit, we're upside down. This isn't supposed to be happening!' it cried out in panic. His eyes grew heavy and his nose was feeling clogged all of a sudden. He was almost too afraid to take a step forward or back, lest he suddenly lost his balance and dropped from the ceiling onto the hard floor.

Just what Mitarai wanted from him. Turning the big bad boxer into nothing more than a panicking mess who'd collapse from it all.

Did they all think he was that stupid, or was it just Mitarai? Juzo focused on the count-down.

*Three, two, one. Now!* Juzo's instincts kicked in. The slight touch of heavy breathing from someone
who had no control over their emotions. Too afraid of being hit by a stray shot to realise what they opened themselves up to.

Knock You Out threw out its left leg, and Juzo his right, about 100cm above from where the ground had been. Their attacks were simultaneous and should have hit thin air from what he could see.

What actually happened was that one second, Juzo felt like he was kicking something invisible, and the next, the entire room changed.

Juzo wasn't on the ceiling anymore. Neither were his opponents. Andou was cowering in the corner with a giant pink version of her head pouring a tiny amount of multi-coloured dust, Kizakura and Kirigiri were on the right side of the room, looking shocked, and Mitarai?

Mitarai flew across the room from where he'd just been kicked in the chest and slammed against Kizakura, who caught him, as both he and Kirigiri kept Mitarai from hitting the wall behind him. The kid himself had the wind entirely knocked out of him. His legs were still shaking like they were trying to regain their balance.

Juzo smirked. It looked like he still had the mind of a champion.

"It's a pretty neat trick you got there. I mean, holy shit, never thought you'd have it in you. No wonder Tengan thinks the sun shines out of your ass."

Mitarai coughed before regaining his composure, as he said, "I-I-I don't get it. Virtual Insanity-

"Name's a bit of a clue. 'Virtual'. But there were other things as well. The fact that you didn't try and get a hit in back then was one of them. You could open up holes, blast light from your hands, and apparently dodge chairs without moving. You didn't want revenge against the guy who hit you in the gut?" Juzo asked, taking a step forward. "No one's that nice, kid."

Juzo decided not to mention the fact that it was just a theory. If he missed the kick, or had been wrong about the Stand, he'd have had no idea what to do. The belief that blood was pooling in his head might have taken him for the count.

That's what makes him the most dangerous guy in the room. I can't let him stay awake. Juzo gave a side-glance to Andou, who was busy cowering in the side of the room. The giant pink head's dust was slowly making its way around the walls of the room, trying to get him from behind. Scratch that. Second-most dangerous.

Anyone who was cowering from their own Stand, and had to sweat like she was to make the dust move so slowly and carefully, was dangerous. At least Mitarai was fully in control. Juzo didn't know if Andou was going to doom them for her own gain, or just because she panicked and lost control.

Knock You Out readied its fists. Either way, he wasn't going to let them use that exit behind them.

"Still, I gotta thank you for one thing, Mitarai." Juzo said. Knock You Out began shadow-boxing and its user enjoyed the smell of freedom. "I had a big problem until now. Thanks to you, I know I've got nothing to fear."

"It's related to your Stand." Kirigiri said as a gunshot echoed behind her. Knock You Out rushed to the left and just managed to avoid the transparent bullet that shot from Detective Man's gun.
"Nice try, I know how that Stand works. Turns truth and lies into goddamn weapons." Juzo took another step forward and changed his mind. Kirigiri was just as dangerous as Mitarai, with her brain and Detective Man together. "But yeah, that's right. See, my Sin's a pretty dangerous thing for a guy like me. I can't punch."

"But Sins don't apply to Stands, do they?" Kizakura asked. He wasn't smiling for once.

"Nope." Juzo replied.

Something was finally going right for him, after the shitty day he'd been having. He let the bitterness flow through him as Knock You Out rushed forward and raised its fists. Red boxing-gloves began to glow as the Stand launched its assault on the three opponents in front of it.

"YOYOYOYOYOYOYOYOYO!" Knock You Out cried. Its punches weren't the mad frenzy of Dio's Holy Diver. These were precise blows by a trained mind, however much it was fuelled by anger and frustration.

Virtual Insanity leapt in front of its user and protected its chest with its arms. A smart choice, considering it managed to avoid breaking anything when shot back towards the wall, taking its user with him. Detective Man managed to avoid the first blow, aimed for its right ribs, but Kirigiri forgot to make it move its head as well. Nothing could stop the right hook that sent it flying after Virtual Insanity.

Kizakura didn't even summon his Stand to protect him. He just took the punch to the gut and flew back against the wall, landing with its hands stretched out and palms hitting the wall first. Smart. It lessened the impact.

Not that it would mean anything. The results were the same; Kirigiri, Kizakura, and Mitarai all flew against the wall and crashed against the stone wall that—supposedly—held an exit.

Juzo shrugged as Knock You Out approached them. "Nothing personal. Just following Munakata's orders. If we want to make a world without Despair, we need to make sacrifices. Naegi and his friends are one of them, and that includes you, Kirigiri."

He'd need the okay from Munakata on Mitarai and Andou. The new Future Foundation was going to need more than just him, Munakata, and Kimura, and Izayoi would go on a rampage if he killed Andou. That, and they could serve another purpose if they weren't going to play along with the new way.

If they wouldn't help rebuild the world, then Munakata would have prisoners to reveal the corruption in the old group. Whether by testimony or trial.

But those were questions for Munakata to figure out. He was the thinker behind all this, instead of Juzo, who was more concerned with the fight in front of him. Knock You Out approached the group slowly and readied itself to launch another barrage of fists. He'd need time to gather up the negative emotions needed to fuel it.

He just had to think of all the idiots at work, all the shit that happened today, and everything he wanted to do to Dio now that he had a Stand of his own.

Yep. That did it. Knock You Out's fists were blazing like the Sun itself now.
A soft chuckle came from Kizakura, who was pulling out a cigarette and a lighter as he said, "The things we do for the people we care about." He lit the cigarette and smiled. "We do things we never imagine, just to make them safe. Hell, just to keep them happy. Because that smile makes it all worth it."

Kizakura was thinking of Jin, and probably thought Juzo felt that way about Munakata. He didn't know how deep Juzo's feelings were for his friend. He'd never know and Juzo would keep it that way. Ever since Dio...

Yeah, Juzo had always been extra-careful about expressing his feelings when no one was looking. "But that doesn't always make it right. Sometimes we make calls doing what we think they'd want, or we do what they want and it only hurts them. It hurts us." Kizakura said. He sighed as a cloud of smoke puffed from his mouth. "I guess that's what you get when you make decisions in the Heat Of The Moment."

Knock You Out couldn't move away in time. The cigarette's flame had exploded and took on a new shape. The first image it took was of a fist flying straight at Knock You Out's face, which threw itself up and avoided any serious damage. The worst it took was a searing blow to the right pectoral area. Juzo bit back a howl of pain as his Stand retreated back to his side.

It had attempted to kick away the flames, moving so fast that you could see the after-images and the wind pushing in the same direction, but it was no use. The fist simple dissipated before the leg made contact and reformed as it left.

So this was Kizakura's Stand. The flames grew until a certain point, in which they then began shaping and moulding themselves into a new form. One that looked humanoid, if it wasn't for the fact that it was made entirely from fire. Juzo could still recognise the look on its face, even as it flickered; the way that a single tear-drop looked to be dripping from its right eye and the sad smile it had.

Its user chuckled as he used the wall behind him as leverage to get himself up. "Knock You Out may be allowed to punch, but you still can't. If I keep this Stand busy, what's keeping Mitarai from using Virtual Insanity to get us out again? But what do you expect," Kizakura said, as he took a step forward. "It's not like you're more than some thug. Not even good at hitting the right things when it counts."

Juzo's eyes flashed with anger and regret and that was what almost killed him.

The fiery Stand flared when Juzo had reacted and its eyes widened. There was a moment of the Ultimate Boxer feeling his entire shirt heat up, and then the heat became blistering, and then scorching. The heat licked his ear-lobes and was already singing the back of his hair.

His jacket was on fire.

Knock You Out span and grabbed the open jacket by its teeth and yanked it in half. The burning fabric flew off Juzo's body and he wasted no time following the old rule about putting yourself out. Stop, drop, and roll. There was no point in fighting if you were burning at the same time.

He hissed from the pain of burnt skin coming into contact with the floor, and his shirt was definitely
ruined by the flames. The fabric probably kept the burns all over his chest and back from getting any worse. He could be thankful for that. A quick check showed that the worst of it was on his back, with bright red welts showing the burns to be first degree.

The rest of the burns on his chest and shoulders were close, but were more accidentally touching the stove and pulling away in time. They were on the soft-side of first degree burns, unlike the worst of it on his back. The pain when moving wasn't anything unbearable. He had boxing injuries that hurt more.

It didn't mean they weren't stinging like a bitch.

Kizakura smiled as Juzo stood up again. He swore as he realised what he just did; taking his eyes off the ball. Mitarai could have already activated Virtual Insanity and Juzo wouldn't have even noticed!

The three of them were standing now, though Mitarai was helping Kirigiri out- or acting like she needed help. If they were even there at all!

"I've done stuff I've regretted," Kizakura said. "I could have been a better friend when he needed it. I could have been a decent teacher and maybe Yukizome wouldn't have gotten mixed up in all this. I could have been a better role model and been there for someone who needed me. These regrets only chain me down though. But the best I can do is move forward and do what little I can."

His Stand nodded and coiled itself around him like a snake. Only, instead of choking the life out of him, it was instead protecting him. Any attempt at attacking him would only get Juzo burnt again.

"This is why you kept your Stand secret. You didn't want to give away the advantage of surprise?" Kirigiri asked.

"Plus I wanted to be nice to you. Give you a little mystery to wrap your head around." Kizakura replied. He burst out laughing and gave a fake apologetic smile. "Guess I should have been more honest. I'm sorry."

"No you're not. Your Stand hasn't reduced its powers yet."

"Wow! You didn't even need to think to realise what I meant."

They weren't even paying attention to him anymore. They all had one eye on him, but this was just a joke to them now. As if they had already won!

"I can still help. Virtual Insanity can't lose here! There's no way to break the illusion, if I keep my distance." Mitarai said. The kid would have to go down first, if Juzo wanted any chance of victory here.

"I can-" Andou tried to take a step forward, until Kirigiri's eyes shot towards the confectioner and made her stop in her tracks.

"No. You stay back, Andou. Sugar Sugar has to be controlled." She said.

So Sugar Sugar couldn't be controlled. Great. Just what Juzo needed. Damnit! Juzo's Stand was meant to finally give him the edge! He was supposed to knock down anything in his way, especially now that his Stand could actually punch, but here he was! Outnumbered and outgunned.
No. No, screw this! I'm not letting Munakata down again. Juzo just had to keep his eye on the prize.
This wasn't the first time he'd been outnumbered and this wasn't the first time he'd fought with a
Stand user.

The Remnants of Despair didn't kill him and these guys sure as hell wouldn't. He had a Stand! All he
needed to do was fight a bit smarter and focus on what he came here to do. Kill Kyouko Kirigiri.

Juzo and Knock You Out got into mirroring poses, both ready to box if need be. The former was
bluffing, but the latter definitely wasn't.

He stared the Ultimate Animator right in the eye and shouted, "You think that shit'll work, Mitarai?!
You're just a stage-hypnotist. You can't mess with my senses if I know how the trick works. If I don't
believe, or don't want to believe, I can see through the bullshit." He and Knock You Out crouched,
readying to strike. "I didn't become the Ultimate Boxer because I was good at it."

Juzo ran forward straight towards Kirigiri. Kizakura unleashed a blast of flame right at him, but he
was too quick for it to do more than singe more of the back of his hair. Just as he pulled his fist back,
he instead threw up his knee towards Kirigiri and felt a familiar touch on his face.

Kirigiri dashed to the right, but Juzo could feel her hair moving leftwards as it stroked against his
oncoming leg.

His knee hit the wall, but that wasn't a problem. A little pain never killed anybody. Not like Knock
You Out's left punch, filled with the power of Juzo's frustrations, which missed Kirigiri and slammed
against the stone wall that promised freedom.

The wall exploded from the force of the blow. Stone flying back and crashing against what sounded
like hard glass. Juzo didn't pay it any mind. He turned and looked down his three opponents, while
Andou cowered in the corner, and stared them down.

"I became the Ultimate Boxer because I'm the goddamn best in the world. Three on one? You just
evened the odds, you bastards." He said, as Knock You Out charged towards them.

He was Juzo Sakakura; Sixth Branch Head and best friend to Kyosuke Munakata. He fucked up
once and it cost the world everything.

He wouldn't fuck up now.

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"Asahina, do you think I'm doing enough?" Naegi asked.

"Huh?" Asahina turned and stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not doing anything!" Naegi said. He was louder than he meant to be.

But it was true. He wasn't doing anything! Dio and his Friend had forced them into a Killing Game
and Naegi wasn't doing anything to help anyone! Livin' On A Prayer was meant to inspire hope in
people, but it wasn't doing a thing!
It can't create hope. All it can do is enhance the feeling that's already there. He reminded himself. You can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved. You have to convince them first.

He had convinced Gozu to turn his back on Despair...for all the good it did him.

The only death, of those he knew about, and it had all been because of him. All because he hadn't seen the signs quick enough. If he had just tried harder, or been quicker, maybe Gozu would be alive now.

For all Naegi told Asahina to not blame herself, he was doing a bad job of practising what he preached.

Maybe it was because they hadn't found anyone yet. Tengan had saved them, Gekkogahara had held off Sakakura before rendezvousing with them again, and now they were just sitting and waiting for something to happen. Nothing they did seemed to have any results.

I thought I was being smart trying to communicate with the outside world. It wasn't against the rules of the game. Naegi wondered why he had been so naive. It didn't need to be a rule because there was no way of speaking with the outside world.

Gekkogahara tried her best to find a signal. No one was picking up. Not even Togami, and he had been in the nearest Fourteenth Branch base to the HQ. Hagakure at least had a cellphone, when they asked him to wait outside. The Mastermind must have seen all this coming.

Now here they were. Doing absolutely nothing, while everyone was fighting with each other.

"Naegi, you are doing something. You're staying alive. That brings people Hope and that's what we need right now." Asahina said.

"And everyone's fighting because of that. You have people fighting for their lives to protect me and others fighting for their lives to kill me." Naegi pushed his back against the wall and let himself slide down to a sitting position.

"Naegi, people wouldn't be doing that if they didn't think you were worth their lives." Gekkogahara said.

"But I'm not! I'm just Makoto Naegi."

"Yep. You’re Makoto Naegi, an average guy with weird luck. But you know what else you are? You’re Makoto Naegi, the guy everyone in the world believes in- no matter what jerks like Munakata and Sakakura say! You stood up to Dio, Naegi. We were all willing to give in until you stood up and spoke against him." Asahina's passionate stare turned uneasy. "I don't know how you're feeling. To know that people are putting it all on the line for you. Whether to help or hurt you. I'm still your friend, though. So if you need help, I'll be there."

Gekkogahara made a noise then. Monomi sounded sad, for some reason. "It'd probably not make you feel good to show you this," She said, as Monomi looked dejected for Gekkogahara, only to then gain some resolve. "But you need to see it. There's no Hope in closing your eyes and ignoring the truth."

The screen changed from Monomi to one of the camera feeds from the Future Foundation building.
Naegi recognised the area as where you went over the bridges to one part of the building to another. It was apparently back when everyone was concerned about an attack from Ultimate Despair.

It was in ruins now, while Naegi's attention focused entirely on the man lying against a stone slab surrounded in blood.

Gekkogahara zoomed in and Naegi recognised the corpse of Kazuo Tengan; the man who had now-sacrificed himself so that Naegi could live.

"It seems like Munakata survived his battle with Tengan. He might be wounded, but not down for the count." Gekkogahara paused before typing out, "I'm sorry, Naegi."

"It's okay, Gekkogahara." Naegi laughed to himself. "It's not the first time someone died because of-

Asahina covered his mouth with the palm of her hand. "No. I'm not letting you finish that sentence." She warned.

"She's right!" Gekkogahara added. She was speaking- okay, typing- a lot faster than normal now. "Kyosuke Munakata doesn't know what he's talking about! Anyone who was willing to stand up to Dio Brando, in soiled clothes, is anything but sheltered. You looked him in the eye and stood firm, even when he was going to use Holy Diver's effect-overwrite on you."

"Naegi, everyone who's stood up for you would do it again in a heart-beat," Asahina said. "Remember the battle at Hope's Peak? All of our dead friends were brought back to break us and you managed to make them stand up to him. They knew what they were doing. Even when they were meant to be fuel for Holy Diver, they held it back and we ended him. Not the Future Foundation, definitely not Munakata, but us. Don't think this is all on you. We're behind you every step of the way. If that means something is your fault, then it's our fault too!"

Naegi wondered what he did to deserve a friend like Asahina.

"Look! The Chairman left a message too." Gekkogahara had the camera zoom in on a tiny piece of writing. It was small enough that even being in the same room would barely make a difference. It seemed to be written in blood. "Read it! Read it!"

'I entrust the world's Hope to you.'

This was Tengan's dying message. Even when facing death, he inscribed a message that may have never been seen to Naegi. Telling him to keep moving forward.

Nothing would bring Tengan back. Naegi would have traded that message and all the well-wishes in the world, if it meant bringing Tengan back to life, but that opportunity would never come to him.

But it still raised his spirits! Tengan must have died without regrets. He, like Gozu, died trying to do what was right.

And here I am, sitting and feeling sorry for myself. Naegi had the key to all this figured out and he was moping around? He turned to Asahina and said, "We need to find Kirigiri. We're not sticking around for this."

"Yeah!" Asahina pumped her fist. She crouched and offered her arms. "It'll be faster if I carried you
and ran."

"No thanks. I'd like to at least use my legs, even if I can't run, unless we're facing some kind of danger." Naegi appreciated the gesture. He'd also like to keep some semblance of pride.

"Makoto! I'm not letting you get yourself in trouble because of your masculinity." Gekkogahara scolded, Monomi having smoke coming out of her ears. "You're getting a piggy-back from Asahina, or you're holding onto the bars of this wheelchair."

He didn't realise how passionate the Ultimate Therapist could be. He decided to give in.

"Okay, okay," He said. "I guess I'll hold onto your chair then."

"Gosh darn right you will."

It was funny. Here he was, trapped in a building with people who wanted to kill him, ranging from supposed allies to Dio's Friend, and he was being scolded by a girl using a computer to speak for her. The tiny pink and white rabbit growled and shook its stick at him as he chuckled at the show of defiance.

Asahina smiled and gently pushed him over to Gekkogahara to get on the chair already.

Tengan may have entrusted the hope of the world to him, and everyone may call him the Ultimate Hope, but Naegi knew the truth. If it wasn't for his friends, the people willing to risk it all for him, he wouldn't be here. It was because of them that he was more than just your average kid with special luck.

It was because of them that he finally had a plan. He was finally going to do something.

*Step one. Find Kirigiri and whoever else is with her. Step two. Gather everyone I can. Step three. Get out of this building and away from the Killing Game.* Naegi's plan had its issues, mainly figuring out how to convince the others. It was still the best he had. Once Kirigiri was back with them, nothing would stop them from finding a solution.

Dio's Friend probably wanted Naegi to slip into self-pity and Despair. Forbidden to run in hallways? It was designed to keep Naegi from bringing everyone together!

They weren't going to get their way. Naegi wasn't going to let Dio or his Friend destroy the Future Foundation. Everyone outside was counting on him; everyone watching this sick and twisted game. There was Komaru and her friends, Togami, Hagakure, and even Class 77-B who were waiting for their names to be cleared.

All of them were counting on Naegi. Counting on him to not give up and help save the Future Foundation.

*And that's just what I'm going to do. No matter what, I won't lose Hope!*
No one would expect Seiko Kimura to charge into the room.

In her bestial state, thanks to her drugs, she was easily making her way towards Ruruka far quicker than Izayoi ever could. All she had to do was follow her heightened senses and fight off all the others who were with her. It'd be easy. Not least because of her out-sizing all of them, thanks to her drugs.

It might have been impossible to track Ruruka down, if it wasn't for her sweet scent. It was just like her to smell just like sugar. Seiko just wanted to go in and hold her friend tightly and never let go while enjoying that sweet sm-

Her train of thought stopped when she realised something.

Sugar wasn't the only thing she could smell.

There was blood and smoke and charred flesh in the exact same room where Ruruka was. Seiko could see it now, just behind the door was her best friend and some kind of danger!

They're hurting her! Those Future Foundation bastards! Seiko picked up the pace and didn't even try slowing down before smashing her way through the door. There was no time to waste when Ruruka was in danger!

The door and wall around it collapsed into splinters and rocks before Seiko's weight. The worst she got were a few injuries that would have bruised, if it weren't for White Rabbit's adaptability. Around her were the sounds of scattering fools and a soft whimper from Ruruka.

Seiko scanned the scene before her. Sakakura was covered in burns and cuts, while Knock You Out had the words 'the exit is fake' pierced through its left arm, leaving it dangling uselessly. Kizakura had a bruise on his left cheek and was favouring his right leg, while Kirigiri seemed to have a wound on one of her left ribs. Both of them flanked Mitarai on the corner next to Ruruka's. Sakakura was directly opposite to Ruruka.

The furniture of the room was oddly arranged. The wall to Seiko's left had the very same door as the one Seiko just burst through, only it looked perfectly intact, and was open to reveal the exact same hallway that Seiko just went past. The bookcases had even formed some kind of barricade between Sakakura and the group of three he was facing. What was going on?! Seiko shook the thoughts out of her head. Never mind, she could figure it out later.

Right now, all eyes were on her.

Mitarai won't interfere. That just leaves these three. Seiko told herself. The soft laugh from Sakakura, compared to the wary glances from Kizakura and Kirigiri, told her who she could turn her back to.

"Kimura, you're right on time. You know what Munakata wants, and you know he's the only guy thinking with his brain around here. Just help me take out Kirigiri and Kizakura and we're good."

"Who cares about Munakata?" She asked, each word heavy on her mouth. Sakakura barely had time to register the shock when Seiko stood upright, back-straight, and looked Ruruka right in the eye. "In the name of Lord Dio, I need to save Ruruka from you all!"
"W-What?" Ruruka blurted out, face pale as a sheet. She only now realised that everyone's attention fell to her.

Apart from Mitarai's, of course. He focused on moving from being behind Kirigiri to being just in front of her.

"You don't have to lie anymore. We can reveal the truth. Lord Dio had us ready this whole time. He showed us another way from the decadent old world. Where we were expelled for no reason." Seiko was lying through her teeth. All to use everyone's paranoia against Ruruka, who understood what was happening.

Sakakura's shock turned into a simmering anger. "After everything he did for you. After you got kicked out of Hope's Peak, you just went to Dio? You didn't even hesitate?" He asked. There was a mocking edge to his voice as he said, "You went crawling back to her? So it's true. The plan to split off from the Future Foundation, it was all to just re-form Ultimate Despair."

"No! That's wrong! Seiko, what are you talking about?!" Ruruka screamed. Seiko didn't like making her friend feel bad, but it was for the greater good; their friendship and loyalty to Lord Dio. All she had to do was go over and grab Ruruka while she could.

Kirigiri spoke before she could do that. "Enough. Sakakura, you can plainly see the need for us to work together and-

The Ultimate Detective couldn't finish her sentence. Seiko couldn't allow Kirigiri to even threaten her time with Ruruka, or her divine mission to ensure Lord Dio's triumph over the Future Foundation. The Ultimate Pharmacist span to face Sakakura and launched her attack.

It was a neat trick she had formulated in her head. Gather the fluids of her eyes and concentrate them around the iris and then release it as a high-pressured blast of fluid that could tear through all those who dared to challenge Lord Dio. She even adjusted the height so that it would easily avoid Mitarai, aiming it just above his hair.

She moved from left to right as the stream of pressurised liquid shot from her eyes and cut through the room like a blade to straw. Sakakura ducked in time and only lost the very top part of his left ear, making him grunt in pain. Kizakura even managed to completely duck, grabbing Kirigiri to try and throw her down with him.

Kirigiri had been quick, but not quick enough to avoid the shot. The right side of her forehead was bleeding, not heavily enough that it would cause blood-loss or nausea. It was enough, however, that the detective had to put a hand over her right eye to keep the blood from blinding her vision.

The flaming creature next to Kizakura- likely his Stand- immediately dimmed down as his eyes widened at his partner's wound.

Seiko gave him no time to try and help Kirigiri with the bleeding. She threw out her hands and declared, "There are only two things I care about, in this wretched world, and those are Lord Dio and Ruruka." Her eyes bulged and she stared right at Ruruka with hunger. "Nothing will get between me and either of them!" She howled.

With that, Seiko now joined the battle with the ferocity of a tiger. Sakakura, Kirigiri, Kizakura, she would fight them all and destroy every last one of them. All so that she could be with Ruruka.
Sugar Sugar was pouring down much more of its sweet, lovely, dust as Ruruka whimpered and screamed. She was probably having trouble after fearing that everyone would see her as a traitor. Seiko felt bad for a moment, before inhaling the sugary dust that the Stand produced, and remembering Mitarai's words.

Ruruka would understand. She just needed to be enlightened, is all.

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"No! No! Get off me!" Ruruka screamed and howled and smashed her fists against Seiko's back.

It was easy when she was slung over Seiko's back and being carried off like she was a sack. Not that it did her any good. Ruruka had never been that strong in the first place, and she was fighting Seiko when the latter was in her giant form. She even managed to tank some of Heat Of The Moment and Detective Man's attacks, when she stole Ruruka away.

Not that any of them could do anything. That stupid Sakakura should have worked with them! They could have taken Seiko down and she'd explain everything.

Instead, Ruruka panicked, Sugar Sugar flooded the room, and now everyone was running away from each other. The only relief Ruruka had was that that exit was fake after all.

Not that it made being kidnapped by a drugged former friend who was obsessed with her any better.

"It's okay, it's okay. That door didn't hold an exit. We're underground. Do you remember? The Future Foundation probably built it; in case Lord Dio's forces ever broke in." Seiko said, nuzzling her head against Ruruka's body.

The touch made Ruruka want to vomit. Knowing what she knew now about Seiko made her wish she never had that stupid Stand in the first place. Not only did she corrupt her beloved Yoi-chan, but she was now in the hands of a Remnant of Despair!

She betrayed humanity. Dio probably found her after she got expelled and- Ruruka couldn't think about it anymore. She had to struggle more and do whatever it takes to get free.

A thought came to her and Ruruka used all her will-power to keep her voice steady and authoritative when she said, "Seiko, this is a command!" Ruruka using her Stand's effect, and a harsh stone, had made Seiko slow down. "Let. Me. Go." She commanded. She had a moment of hope, before it was mercilessly crushed.

"I can't do that, Ruruka. You'd just run off with Izayoi and get hurt. You don't realise it yet; Lord Dio's dream." Seiko stopped in her tracks and dropped Ruruka.

They were a few floors up from where they had been and were in the middle of the hallway. Ruruka could barely gather her bearings before Seiko grabbed her face hard and dragged her towards one of the monitors. It was a tight grip as Seiko's fingers forced Ruruka's eyes wide open. Sugar Sugar was still far behind the girls.
Maybe that was why Seiko wasn’t listening to her.

No. She had stopped listening to Ruruka long before that.

"I'm sorry if this hurts. You can beat me and kick me and make me eat dirt when this is over. But please listen," Seiko begged, even as she tightened her grip on Ruruka's head. "Lord Dio and Mitarai want a world of certainty. Isn't that what you want? A world where you'll never fear if someone's going to betray you? We can be friends in that world. You can have whatever you want from me, and I can finally eat your delicious sweets."

"You won't like them because they're mine though! You just want them because they're sweets and Sugar Sugar's brainwashed you." Ruruka felt tears run down her eyes again. She bared her heart to Seiko and prayed it would do something. "You, Yoi-chan, everyone, I just wanted you all to recognise me. Making sweet things is all I can do. It's all I am! If people enjoy the sweets I put my soul into, then it's like they're enjoying my existence and-"

The monitor screen flickered on and Ruruka immediately stopped talking. Her body went cold as she recognised the dominant smirk and ambition-filled eyes before her.

"Ruruka Andou," Dio said. "So lonely. Even with a lover like Sonosuke Izayoi, you never quite felt at ease. Your mind and heart constantly at war with itself over your fears. Will he stay by my side, no matter what? Will he find something he loves more than my sweets? You've never known peace of mind. Perhaps that is why you aligned yourself with I, Dio!"

What is he- The screen changed and instead Mitarai now appeared on the screen. Ruruka was confused, not least about why Dio was saying she was one of his followers, and now Mitarai was up there. I don't-

She stopped thinking and let herself stare into the screen. The way that the brights colours behind Mitarai moved and the strange humming sound made her feel...safe. As if she was letting herself sink into a pool of pure warmth and love.

"We can help you, Andou. Dio and I have a plan. We're going to make a world without fear or hatred. A world where all the sins we've committed can be erased. You and Kimura can be friends again. You'll have the certainty you wanted. The work outside this building's already been done. Let's leave this place united in Hope. We can all reach Heaven together. That's what we're fighting for, right?"

Yes. Yes it was what she was fighting for.

She and Yoi-chan only joined the Future Foundation because she had been scared of what would happen to her in The Tragedy. The carnage of Ultimate Despair, and the man whose name they pledged their acts to, had horrified her. It made her seek out the closest thing to safety.

Only she didn't feel safe, did she? She saw how Seiko and those like Munakata and Sakakura spoke to each other. What if they took Seiko's side over how the incident at the practical exams had happened? Why wouldn't they betray her, if they decided Bandai could do her work just as well?

That's why she had to make her own organisation. An organisation that would never betray her. She would give them everything, including her sweets, and they would give her everything in turn. It would have been a beautiful relationship.
Or it would have been destroyed by fear. Fear that the sweets she offered wouldn't be enough. Fear that everyone around her would betray her, because how could she know that they wouldn't?

Lord Dio and Mitarai, on the other hand, would never betray her. She would offer them her services, her life, and her soul, and she would finally have it. The certainty that she would never be betrayed by those close to her. A world where she, Yoi-chan, and Seiko could all live happily as friends.

Ruruka felt peace of mind as Seiko let go of her head.

She was crying tears of joy as she said, "I...I understand now....all this time, I wanted friends...friends who could never betray me. I thought if I could control them," She shook her head at how foolish it sounded now. Ruruka finally knew what she wanted. "Lord Dio's Heaven. That's the world I want."

"Ruruka!" Yoi-chan's voice echoed through the hallway. She turned to find him running down the hallway opposite of the way she and Seiko had came. It looked like he had seen the whole thing, from the look of horror on his face. "What did she-"

All Ruruka had to do was raise a hand and Seiko stopped growling. It was unnecessary, when Yoi could easily be brought over to their side.

"Yoi-chan, I have the bestest idea ever!" Ruruka said. She poured all the sugar and sweetness she could muster into her voice. "Now that I've seen what Lord Dio wanted all along, I get it now! We simply have to help him create Heaven! Yoi-chan, we're joining Dio."

If Yoi-chan understood what she was saying, he didn't show it. All he was doing was staring down at his hands and then towards her arms. Oh yeah, she had forgotten that the grip he had on her left arm earlier had still left a mark.

*I guess Sugar Sugar's effect can run out, after a while.* Ruruka thought to herself. It was a pretty long time though; which meant it could still be useful for Lord Dio's designs.

"What is-I don't-" Yoi-chan kept staring at Ruruka's arm. He seemed close to tears when he stared into her eyes, begging for an answer. "What did I do to you?"

"Nothing that can't be forgiven if you simply join us. It won't even matter, if you just let Sugar Sugar take hold again." Ruruka said. She could hear it approaching now and would easily make up for the lack of a video for Yoi-chan right now.

Unfortunately, the idea didn't seem appeal to Yoi-chan. He stumbled back like he'd been burnt as badly as Sakakura. "No, No, I won't do that. I won't let that thing corrupt our love again! I won't let a monster like Dio do it either. Please, whatever has made you like this- made her like this- you have to fight it. Please, I know I failed you, but you're being-"

Izaoi stopped speaking when he realised the intensity of Ruruka's glare.

He dared insult Lord Dio in front of her?!

It looked like she was going to have to do this the hard way.

The only punishment worthy of someone so close to her who was readying to betray her. It'd be an even worse Despair than when Seiko betrayed her at Hope's Peak! Ruruka would never feel that way again. She would witness Lord Dio's ascension to Heaven, no matter what!
"You will join Lord Dio, Sonosuke?" She asked, smiling as Seiko's White Rabbit growled. She had a feeling it'd need to be battle-ready. "Or are you going to betray me?"

The choice was clear to her boyfriend.

Would he choose Love or Betrayal?

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"There's something I need to tell you," Sakakura's eyes matched his expression. Speaking the secret would pain him, but he felt it needed to be said now. "I-"

"Enough." Munakata said. He drew his blade and walked towards Sakakura. Killing In The Name moved with him.

He would have done this anyway. There was no denying the truth, if even Kimura had fallen to Dio. To hear it from the mouth of his best friend would be too much.

Why else would you show your Stand, if you did not intend to fight with it immediately? To show your Stand was to show your heart. It made you vulnerable to the pain of its injuries, if someone exploited your vulnerability. All it did was bring risk to you.

Better to hide your Stand and heart. Protect it well and only reveal it when you had to. Otherwise, it would only bring you pain.

Munakata remained an enemy of Despair. Sakakura wouldn't feel any unnecessary pain, while Munakata made his interrogation. He was already littered with burns and scars. This was a mercy, really.

The blade plunged right through Sakakura's chest, Killing In The Same striking the same exact spot on Knock You Out's chest, and Munakata didn't even blink at the blood gushing from Sakakura's mouth. He looked straight through that look of anguish on his friend's face.

"I know the truth, Sakakura." Munakata said. "Tengan told me everything."

Sakakura looked shocked, before fear and confusion took over. "Wha-Mun-"

"You lied for Dio on that day, didn't you?" He asked.

"Kyo-" The Ultimate Boxer couldn't finish; Killing In The Name had just cut its blade down on his back. Blood sputtered out from it like water from a fountain.

"Killing In The Name doesn't need a lie from the tongue, it seems. Only from the heart." Munakata did nothing as Sakakura fell to his knees. "You kept it secret all this time. You let me believe it was simply Dio lying to you. I suppose you both enjoyed laughing about it. You and Yukizome."

Were those tears of regret, or simply pain?
"Pl-" Killing In The Name now struck a defenceless Knock You Out across the chest. Sakakura's own body opened up and his lower torso was painted red.

"So Dio not only corrupted the woman I loved, but also my best friend. Tell me, what did he offer you that made you turn to Despair?" Munakata didn't know why he asked. The answer wouldn't bring him Hope.

"It-I-" Killing In The Name struck again and again. Its blade was like a brush on a canvas, only every time it touched Sakakura, his body would burst out blood.

The lies in his heart had turned against him. Did he have an excuse for what he had done? Was he so attached to his reasoning that it was now tearing his body apart?

Munakata stared down with dark eyes, completely lacking in emotion. "Maybe you thought you were doing it for me. Maybe you thought I'd be content to live in Dio's world, if it was with my friends. Was it fear that drove you? Was Dio's presence that terrifying?"

Killing In The Name struck twice with each question before it then sheathed its blade and Munakata knew then that he would never have an answer. Not from Sakakura, when he was in that state.

The burns around his back and arms now had thin but deep red lines through them. The claw-marks on his ribs were now complimented by the scars left by Killing In The Name's blade. It had been merciless in its judgement of those found guilty.

There was no point in lingering here. Munakata simply flung his right arm to the side, making the blood fly off the blade, and he sheathed his own blade. There wasn't time for a proper cleaning now. Especially when he had more work to do.

He turned his back and took the first step when he heard a choked, weak, and dying voice.

"Muna-Kyo- Please." Sakakura was probably stretching out his hand as he laid in his blood. Knock You Out moaned from behind Munakata's left. It reminded Munakata of whenever Sakakura trained too hard and had to beg Munakata and Chisa to help him get up so he could get to the showers and out of those damn-

Munakata did not look back. He simply kept walking and ignoring the pitiful moans of his best friend. The one of many people who he always had faith in for so long. The last of the ties to his past that Dio had corrupted with Despair had finally been cut.

Dio was probably laughing in Hell now. His Friend was probably pleased with themselves. They, and the rest of the Remnants, must have thought that Munakata would have broken by now. Nothing more than a weeping wretch, after what he had done.

He tightened his shaking grip on his blade.

Damn you, Despair. Munakata may have lost the people in his life, but he still had his principles. The resolve to destroy Despair and the ideals of Hope remained in his heart still! I will not waver. Humanity relies on my ability to withstand all this; the Future Foundation's treachery towards humanity. If it means throwing away my memories with Sakakura, then I'll do it.

It would seem like throwing away his bonds was an act of Despair, especially to those like Naegi, but they were wrong. It was because of Hope that Munakata forced himself forward. To put the
good of the world and mankind ahead of his own self. To cut down his former-comrades so to keep them from corrupting the world.

To have gone through that and still be free of Despair. It sounded impossible.

But Munakata carried on. He would kill Makoto Naegi, along with Aoi Asahina and anyone else in their group, before moving onto the others. If Kimura had fallen, then Tengan had been telling the truth after all.

Was there nothing that Dio did not taint with his very existence?

"You'll pay for making me become a monster, Despair. You'll pay for what you've done, ally of Dio!" Munakata said. It was his vow to remain true to the path he chose.

Munakata picked up the pace as Sakakura collapsed behind him. There was no time for him to look back at what he had done.

If he hesitated, or looked back for even a moment, he knew he would be lost to Despair.

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"Be honest, what are our chances of winning?" Kizakura asked.

Izayoi wondered if his (temporary) partner actually wanted an answer, or if he was simply trying to learn more about the kind of man he was. The Ultimate Blacksmith had trouble reading people sometimes, and that was especially so for people like Kizakura. The way they smiled without joy confused him.

"Our odds of survival should be good, if we know when to retreat." Izayoi looked back at the other end of the bridge. He and Kizakura stood at the centre, even after the sounds of running had long since vanished. "We could lead them away from Kirigiri and Mitarai. If they went to the left, we can just lead them to the right."

"Until Kimura's enhanced senses catches Kirigiri's scent. You know, this'd be easier if you told me some of Andou's regrets." Kizakura said.

"Dio's brainwashing has likely removed all doubt and regret from her mind." Izayoi replied, somewhat more tersely than before.

"What about her heart?" Kizakura asked. It was obvious what he wanted. He probably didn't want to say it out loud; to ask Izayoi to reveal Ruruka's secrets.

No, I will never betray that. Not after what I've done. Izayoi should have known better. The signs were obvious from how Yukizome was acting, and how he felt himself change when he first smelt and tasted the dust. If he just controlled himself, he'd have never hurt Ruruka.

Sugar Sugar wasn't unstoppable. It clearly couldn't defeat the brainwashing techniques used by the monitors; the very same ones that Makoto Naegi and others said were behind the rise of Ultimate Despair. Maybe, if there was a way to break the brainwashing techniques, there was a way to break
Sugar Sugar's power too.

Izayoi had to find a way. He had to redeem himself after what he had done.

The memory of Ruruka fighting his hold on her arm, the skin reddening as he refused to let go, and the fear in her eyes filled him with shame. She had been afraid of him. The one she was meant to never fear betrayal from.

Ruruka was always a sensitive girl. She was always afraid that people would hurt her, if she didn't have something on them.

Maybe that was why her Stand gave its victims no option than to obsess over her.

*I can't simply blame it all on the Stand. I have to atone.* Izayoi knew Ruruka best and could now do what he should have done at the start of all this. He would never fight his love; but he could fight Kimura. He knew how White Rabbit worked better anyway. Appeals to the heart could come during and after.

"Sugar's pretty flammable. I guess that'll make her keep her distance." Kizakura mused, as he gave Izayoi a look. It was a look the blacksmith was familiar with, where you couldn't tell if you could trust the person next to you or not. "You really think you can stop her with words alone?" He asked.

Izayoi put a hand over his heart, gripping the fabric of his clothes as if holding the organ itself, and said, "I believe that, no matter what, I can reach her heart. Her mind and body are pledged to Dio, but her heart will remember the love we have between us. Our vow to survive and make more friends. To always love, trust, and never betray one another."

"The body is a vessel for the soul. That was something Jin always said; always loved acting like he made up things you could find in any cheap philosophy book. He even got proved right back at Hope's Peak, helping kick Dio down to hell." Kizakura smiled nostalgically before pulling out a flask. "I'd rather my body stayed intact." He said, taking a sip.

"Then fight well and fight carefully." Izayoi advised. He heard the sounds a beast rampaging in the distance. "They're coming."

The two readied themselves on the bridge between Ruruka and Kimura on one side, and Kirigiri and Mitarai on the other. Izayoi pulled out his daggers and Wonderwall already enhanced their sharpness and hardness. Kizakura flicked his lighter and Heat Of The Moment burst out, sitting delicately on one of the railings, as the flames lit up the vast dark abyss around them.

If they had stuck together, everyone would have been attacked, and possibly too close to when the poison would be activated. They'd all be vulnerable to Kimura then. Kirigiri agreed to go, and it was agreed that Mitarai would go with her- despite his protests. He only backed down when Kirigiri said that she'd have no one else by her side, not even her friends from Hope's Peak.

"Your Virtual Insanity, here most of all, is one of the most impressive Stands I've ever seen. It'll be useful if we encounter Munakata," Kirigiri had said. She took Mitarai's hand in her own and stared into his eyes. "I need you to do this. It seems strange, when we've known each other for a short while, but I trust you. I feel as if you are the one who may save my life, if things go wrong."

*But that's not why we sent him with you, is it? That's not why you're going alone with him.* Izayoi remembered the look exchanged between Kirigiri and Kizakura before she and Mitarai left. A look
filled with questions, regrets, and understanding. *I hope you know what you're doing.*

Kizakura laughed to himself. Izayoi didn't know if it was at him until he said, "Y'know, part of being a responsible parent is knowing when to let the kids make risks. The point of buying time isn't making them succeed. It's giving them every second they need to get the job done. Even if they fail, what matters is that they have a shot. What matters is that there's the mutual trust that, even if we go down, it meant something."

"You believe Kirigiri can survive this?" Izayoi asked.

"As much as you believe Andou can survive this." Kizakura replied. It was a good an answer as Izayoi was ever going to get.

The approaching sounds grew louder and fiercer, as the two women finally came into view. Kimura was using herself as a beast of burden, moving on her hands and knees, galloping ahead as she let out a fierce battle-cry. Ruruka rode on top of her back and had a fierce hatred in her eyes that Izayoi had seen a hundred times; but never directed at him.

White Rabbit and Sugar Sugar were just behind their users, rushing ahead with the same speed, and the latter's permanent look of happiness did nothing to lessen the former's blood-lust.

Two of the Future Foundation's strongest and both were completely loyal to the memory and cause of Dio Brando. All other thoughts and free-will had been stripped from them and, in exchange, they were made into the new Ultimate Despair. Lapdogs for whatever Dio's friend had planned.

Izayoi would free his love from this curse, even if it meant his own death.

"I will always be there for you, Ruruka. No matter what it does to me." Izayoi crouched and stiffened his position, matching his resolve with his body. "For love and delicious sweets." He whispered the words he and Ruruka would say to one another.

The words they'd whisper whenever Ruruka felt as if she was all alone in the world, or needed to be re-assured that Izayoi would never abandon her. He said it every time she needed to hear it, and would say it a thousand more times.

He was under no illusions. Ruruka would fight him, bringing up what he did to her today and possibly lie about a dozen other things, and would generally try to break his spirit. Make him doubt their love.

Yet that didn't matter because he had faith in her. He had faith that the love between them would reach her and overcome everything. From his betrayal to her fears to even the brainwashing that warped her mind, his voice would reach her.

No matter what happened, Izayoi knew that love would win the day.

After all, without love, there was no Hope.

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"Do you think we're safe?" Mitarai asked, his voice shaking.

"I doubt that Andou and Kimura will be able to break through Izayoi and Kizakura in time." Kirigiri held her breath after that.

It had been minutes since she had finally remembered who Kizakura was. Why she felt strangely at ease around him.

_I used to call him Uncle. He'd take pictures of me and my father playing in that meadow._ Kirigiri wondered why he didn't say anything before all this. He must have had proof somewhere. _Perhaps he felt guilt about how my father left me. Or he decided that he didn't want a reminder that his friend died and was resurrected, only to serve his murderer._

Kizakura knew what he was doing in letting her leave with Mitarai. He was taking a risk and assumed she would protect herself from here on out. He and Izayoi were the only line of defence against Andou and Kimura, if the blacksmith could even be trusted.

There was a chance that they would meet again. It was a very small chance, knowing both girls' Stands and the destruction they could wreak together.

Mitarai shuffled in place, looking unsure about the plan. "Kizakura...maybe if we go back, we can-"

"It's useless. Their only hope lies in somehow convincing Andou that her apparent years-long loyalty to Dio is flawed." Kirigiri said. Mitarai deflated further.

The two of them were waiting in one of the many rooms of the underground copy of the Future Foundation building. They were still in the lower levels, possibly close to where the generator-room was, and they had agreed to wait and attempt to regain their breathes. Kirigiri was standing closest to the door after arguing that Virtual Insanity would work best if Mitarai was at a safe distance.

Not that anyone would be following them now.

The two of them were finally alone and it was nearing the end of this round. If Kirigiri didn't end this game soon, or confront the Mastermind and make him end it, then she would die. Die without having found the culprit.

It was something she was ready to do. For so long, she only trusted herself to find the truth and put it above all else. Naegi had been sent as a decoy to uncover Dio's lies once and it almost killed him. She had prioritised finding the truth and taking the culprit down immediately- bringing him to justice instead of ending the game completely.

Not anymore. She had friends again. Friends who she could trust to carry on her will and keep Dio from returning and plunging the world into an eternity of servitude towards him. If she fell, Naegi and Asahina would be heart-broken, but she knew they would be strong enough to carry on.

_Naegi, do not ever lose Hope._ Kirigiri wondered if her words could somehow reach him. After all, if ghosts and Stands existed, then why not this?

She stopped and looked right into Mitarai's eyes, he looked confused before she said, "I think we need to talk about our Sins. We'll start off with mine," Kirigiri revealed her bracelet and let Mitarai have a moment to read the Sin inscribed on it. "If I don't end this game by the end of the round, I'll
die unless Naegi dies first." Her matter-of-fact tone did nothing to stop him from turning white and stuttering over his words.

"W-What?! Kirigiri, you've been keeping this secret the whole time? What about-You mean-That's why you didn't want to show it earlier? Even when we were with the others?" He asked.

"You were still a stranger to me, back then. Besides, if I told Naegi my Sin, he would have lost faith in himself. Worst case, he would have volunteered to sacrifice himself so that I could live. He didn't need to know the issues I was dealing with." Kirigiri softened her tone. "He needs hope just as much as anyone."

"I guess sacrificing himself would be the only thing he could do in this game. Right now, he's useless." Mitarai said. He spoke in a low voice, sounding almost disdainful.

"Naegi may not be the fastest, strongest, or smartest person here, but he isn't useless." Kirigiri couldn't stop the words from coming out of her mouth. "Gozu died after Naegi freed him from Despair. A Despair he fell in because of manipulation. I have faith in him and Asahina to find Dio's Friend, if I do not survive the next round."

It was Mitarai's turn to react badly, as his eyes lit up and he took her wrists into his hands. "Don't say that! Kirigiri, I promise you, we'll find a solution to this. You don't have to keep up a strong front just for me."

This is it. Kirigiri knew what would come next for her. She had been waiting to hear those words.

Kirigiri was rarely one for shows of emotion. Naegi was always the open book of the two; happy to reveal his secrets and show his emotions, unlike the more guarded and cautious detective. If she kept in control of her exterior, then she would be in control of the situation around her. People tended to let their guards down when you appeared composed no matter what.

Her body began to shake, her eyes began to quiver, and her voice was unsteady. "Mitarai, I'm sure it must have been horrible for you to see your class fall into Despair. Having to fear for your life." She said.

"It was tough, but I kept on moving. Because I had Hope, and we can't lost it no matter-"

Mitarai could finish his sentence as Kirigiri wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. He let out a cry of surprise and nervously held her as well, softly rubbing her back as she let a tear roll down her face.

"I don't want to die, Mitarai. I can still do more for people. There's still truth that needs to be discovered. But if it means killing my best friend...then..."

She paused and tightened her grip, to signify that she couldn't finish the sentence, despite knowing the implications. Mitarai strengthened his hold and seconds of silence passed before he exhaled. He loosened his grip and moved back, making Kirigiri let go of him so that he could gently hold her by the arms.

"There might be a way," He said, his voice more hopeful than before. As if he finally realised something, or had what he wanted all along. "Kirigiri, how do you think these bracelets are being powered? How are they being signalled to go off if a Sin's committed? It'd have to have some way of knowing."
"You think this is an AI at work?"

"Maybe. It'd have to be close. Or maybe it's a simple system that records and tracks us. All it needs is a computer. A computer like-" Mitarai stopped and smiled at her. "I have an idea. Kirigiri, I think there might be a way to save you and Naegi."

"Y-You mean it?" Kirigiri asked. He nodded and she returned his smile. He was already walking towards the door as she said, "I'm not surprised. Somehow, I always knew you'd be the one to try and rescue me from this."

Ryota Mitarai was finally at ease having his back to her. "Really? Me? What made you think that?" He asked.

"Because you're Dio's Friend."

Detective Man manifested and threw up its pistol and fired without checking its aim. There was no time to make sure that she would hit the spine; she could already see that the Truth Bullet would only hit him in the leg. At least it would strike him before he could use Virtual Insanity.

Mitarai's eyes, once filled with confidence, revealed horror as he turned and his leg was struck through by Kirigiri's words. It was the last thing she saw before she ran straight at him.

*Keep your eyes shut. Don't let Virtual Insanity trap you. If you can avoid letting him control the 'atmosphere', you can restrain him.* Kirigiri told herself. Mitarai was physically weak and could do nothing as Kirigiri tackled into him.

As they crashed onto the ground, Kirigiri using Mitarai's body to cushion her fall, she grabbed his right arm and twisted it behind his back. She placed a knee on the back of his neck and shoved his chest onto the ground. With her eyes shut, Mitarai's right leg pierced by a Truth Bullet, and a firm grip on his arm, Kirigiri had successfully disarmed Mitarai.

It happened so fast that Mitarai only regained his senses after hissing from the arm-lock. "How did-"

"I didn't. All I had was a suspicion. A suspicion that Detective Man can confirm without harm to the innocent." Kirigiri replied, her Stand aiming its gun right at Mitarai's free arm.

"We're alone...all this time, you suspected Tengan and didn't move because of it." Mitarai was already crying, the droplets staining the ground as he began to slam his head against the floor. The self-hatred wasn't faked, after all. He spoke through his teeth as he muttered, "I'm such an idiot. Stupid, naive, foolish, useless idiot!"

So he was like the Warriors of Hope; sincerely believing in Dio's goals instead of being brainwashed. It made sense. Dio scorned those who followed him mindlessly like trained dogs. His Friend had to come to him willingly and with a stable state of mind.

Kirigiri kept control, however, and only tightened her grip. Any sympathy she might have had for him was outweighed by what he had done and the need to keep him trapped so that he would end this game.

She listed her reasoning to him, so that he wouldn't entirely blame himself.
"Gozu's turn to Despair seemed out of character. As did Kimura's and Andou's. If they were truly loyal to Dio, he'd have given them Stands. Especially if they were skilled enough to keep cover for this long. Sugar Sugar should have made the former more open about secrets to the latter. It's possible that Andou and Kimura knew each other's secret, but why leave out Izayoi? Not to mention the fact that their behavior was radically different from before. There was also your superior control of your Stand, even when supposedly you only gained it today. All of this was assumption-based, however,

It should have been her first clue, thinking back to where Mitarai had been thrown by Another Brick On The Wall.

"You were positioned right by the door, when Yukizome activated Another Brick On The Wall. Your head was just outside. Easy enough to be free of her control, but also free from another thing," Kirigiri frowned and tightened her hold. Mitarai must have known about what kind of things she would reveal. "Having to hear her secret about Dio."

Kirigiri knew what Dio did with Class 77-B, and now also their teacher. There were photos and videos, where captured by Dio's orders or for Ultimate Despair's own pleasure, of what he did to them all. It was all the same; one of them positioning themselves submissively to Dio who smiled and would take them as if they were tools for his enjoyment.

Mitarai either had a complete lack of morals or, more likely from how her words made him freeze up, was extremely deluded about Dio.

He created a story to live with himself and Yukizome threatened that.

"It makes sense. Class 77-B fell into Despair because they were exposed to the trauma of a classmate's death, but also to another form of stimuli." Kirigiri said. "Your animation skills. Subliminal messaging to make the mind associate Despair with pleasure. Or, connecting Dio Brando with pleasure. It's why Gozu tried to kill Naegi."

"Not...kill...capture." Mitarai grunted. "No one was meant to die."

It was all coming together. Mitarai truly did believe in what Dio said about Heaven, peace of mind, and a world of absolute certainty. He could have brainwashed them all with Virtual Insanity, but instead wanted...this.

"I see. I think I understand. It's not that Dio brainwashed you." Kirigiri said. "You're in denial. You sincerely believe that Dio Brando was fighting for Hope."

Mitarai struggled harder, wincing as Kirigiri kept her hold on his arm. "He was! Humans can't defeat Despair on their own. They're too weak! They need to be guided. They had to realize how bad the old world was."

"Is that why Dio was right to have caused The Tragedy? Were my classmates simply stepping-stones to Hope? Did Chiaki Nanami deserve to die?" Kirigiri asked, refusing to let up one inch. "Is that what you'd tell yourself whenever Dio would rape your classmates? When he felt bored and wanted to assert his power?"

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Mitarai shook his head and howled. He threw up his free arm and pressed his hand against his left ear and screamed at the top of his lungs. "He had to do those terrible things! It was so they could feel Despair and be happy. He'd never do it otherwise. He had a reason
for all of it. He found the way to Heaven. A world without Despair! My anime showed him that! I saved him from his own past! I can help humanity too, even past all this. None of it will matter once we can erase the sins of the past!"

He had the common sense to activate Virtual Insanity, despite Kirigiri's shut eyes, while struggling. Andou and Kimura's war-cries could be heard with a loud slamming noise against the door. It was meant to make Kirigiri panic and let go so that she could make sure it wasn't actually them.

If it wasn't an illusion, and Kizakura and Izayoi were now dead, then that was a risk she had to take.

She felt vindicated by the fact that Mitarai was struggling harder against her grip, rather than being comforted by the arrival of two helpers. Virtual Insanity could do nothing about her sense of touch; as she fought against his frantic attempts to shove her off. He barely got an inch off the ground before being put back down.

"I'm not letting you stop me! Not when I'm so close." Mitarai growled. "If it means putting my life on the line. If it means throwing away my own morality, for the sake of the world, I'll do it."

"He didn't care about you." Kirigiri said, more out of pity than anything.

"Yes. He. Did. Even when I found out about what he did. When I threatened to take away his free will, he still loved me." Mitarai stopped fighting for a moment and simply laid there, sniffling as he said, "I failed him. I failed him so many times, and he still cares about someone as pathetic as me."

Kirigiri thought the fight left him then, before he threw himself up with a strength she didn't think he had in him. He managed to get two, two and a half, inches off the ground before the detective pushed him back down again.

"I won't betray him now!" He screamed and tilted his body to the right as Kirigiri pressed him against the ground.

Why had he done that? Did he think that he could somehow use the force of the drop to loosen Kirigiri's hold on his arm, or maybe get on his back and be able to kick her?

That was when Kirigiri felt something stir across Mitarai's back. A strange energy that made Kirigiri's knee and arm shake just from touching Mitarai's body. Was this the work of Virtual Insanity?

No. Virtual Insanity doesn't work with touch. What's happening to hi- Kirigiri only then realised what it was. It was what had given the Future Foundation their Stands to fight and tear one another apart, whilst Mitarai could pick them off and make them slaves of Dio. It was the same thing that had changed the fate of the world so many times before.

A Stand Arrow.

Kirigiri lifted her knee, let go of his arm, and threw his body over to confirm her fears. She could see the golden arrow-head sinking into the bleeding-wound on Mitarai's right pectoral muscle, right where his jacket pocket was, and a place that she should have searched!

Why hadn't she searched his body? Why had she let herself get over-confident and neglect this?

Mitarai was heavily rapid heavy breathes and spit ran down both sides of his mouth. There was a
chance for her to choke him out and prevent him from-

The odds of success were too small. Kirigiri had seen what a Stand Requiem could do and knew better than to challenge it. After seeing just what Don't Stop Me Now was capable of, the thought of Virtual Insanity Requiem was too much for her to imagine.

*I have to escape.* Kirigiri stood up and made for the door. She'd have to find Naegi and Asahina and warn them. They had to get out of this building as soon as possible. *Virtual Insanity alone was almost unbeatable in these conditions. If he can unlock Requiem-*

"Thank you, Kirigiri." Mitarai said. "I was such a fool. I only realise it now. Gas-lighting you and playing with your emotions? That's not Hope; that's cruelty. The same with everyone else. I can't just brainwash them and expect things to be alright. Warping their minds doesn't fix the problem, it just makes it go away for a while."

Kirigiri was inches from the door. She should have opened it and ran out and never stopped running, but instead stood there in fearful silence as Mitarai stood up. The Truth Bullet had only gone through the upper part of his right leg, between the knee and his waist, meaning it should have hurt but not disabled him.

Only there was no pain in Mitarai's voice as he smiled and said, "Because I now feel it. That sensation that Dio has that made him so smart and determined. I have that warm sense of certainty and security that let him see the big picture. You're right, Kirigiri. I used to be in denial. Denial about how I really felt about all the horrible things that Dio did. I told myself he did it because it made them feel Despair, or because it was a necessary sacrifice, but now I know.

Dio was simply acting on his desires. All men are flawed; even him. It's why I kept insisting we overwrite what he did, when he reaches Heaven. Yet I used to be afraid that he'd never reach it and that the sins would scar my classmates forever. Now I know that won't be the case. Because I see victory ahead and that's because of one thing."

There it was. The spark of power that made Kirigiri overcome the tiny but loud part of her that wanted to fall onto her knees and weep and beg for his forgiveness. She threw open the door and ran, only taking care to look back in case Detective Man needed to fire any rounds at Mitarai, if he followed her. Whether it did any good or not didn't matter. The point was just running.

She had her notebook on her. There was still time to write in whatever she knew and put it somewhere safe. In case Mitarai found her and used his Requiem on her.

Mitarai was walking. He was walking towards her in a calm and confident manner, so unlike his normal self, and so much like Dio would. It didn't mean Kirigiri didn't stumble in her step whenever she heard him make another step towards her. The urge to stop and plea for her life and the lives of her friends was beaten down again. She couldn't let herself fall into Despair at the fact of his overwhelming might.

Retreat was her only option. There was no way she could ever defeat him in a battle now and there was only one reason for that.

The same reason that Mitarai, in all his power and glory, knew he would triumph.

"I finally have peace of mind."
Stand Stats

Heat of the Moment
User: Koichi Kizakura
Stats
Destructive Power B
Speed C
Range B
Durability B
Precision C
Developmental Potential C

Abilities
Stand can enhance flames at a 5m radius using the user's positive emotions and/or memories of a person or other living being close to them. These flames can manipulated into shapes by the user then. Ability to strengthen flames is enhanced when close to a figure from the past who is/was close to them. Cannot create the flame, only enhance a pre-existing one, and negative emotions in the user will weaken the ability.

Can cause flames to ignite at a radius of 5m by reminding the target of regrets or inspiring negative emotions in them. The intensity of the flames are relative to the extent of regret and/or negative emotion inspired in the target's heart.
"You did well, Ryota. An entire day of seeing the inner darkness of mankind and you did not shy away."

"I'm sorry, Dio. I should have never doubted you. You've always trusted me and I keep doubting you."

"Because you are too gentle. You've only ever been a victim until now and so you look at others and see yourself. You hate yourself too much and so you see yourself as scum. I, Dio, can't understand it myself. The mind can be a useful tool, but also your greatest enemy."

"Sometimes I wish I could be as confident as you. Maybe when I finally get to the part where I make people happy, instead of just bringing them misery. Instead of hurting everyone I come across."

"All it requires is the ability to look yourself in the eye and have total, uncompromising belief in yourself. Besides, you helped me all those years ago and enabled me to discover and attain my dream. That is more than enough to balance the despair you have caused...Ryota, I want you to do something."

"What?"

"Look into my eyes and repeat after me; 'What I'm doing is right because I know it is right.'"

"Huh?"

"You doubt in yourself because you focus on the past. You focus on the harm caused and the evil in necessary evil. I, Dio, simply look toward Heaven and live in the moment otherwise. It's only natural that I have a healthier sense of self-belief than you."

"If you think that'll work...What I'm doing is right because I know it is right. How many times should I say it?"

"Until your heart is free of doubt, Ryota. When you remember that everything we do is worth what we will create. For those things that we may dislike about the past, we will simply erase it. It will be as if it never happened to your classmates."

"Like it never happened. Like if you broke something valuable, but then repaired it perfectly, it's like you never even broke it in the first place!"

"Exactly. Now, I don't want to rush you, but I am not yet tired and listening to you say 'What I'm doing is right because I know it is right' is not exhilarating in the slightest."
"Th-I-You are just-Fine. But I'm taking as long as I need to for this...Okay. What I'm doing is right because I know it is right. What I'm doing is right because I know it is right..."

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The hallways of the Future Foundation Headquarters had survived the Final Killing Game fairly well.

The size of the building was what saved it. It had been built to be the overseas counterpart to Hope's Peak Academy and then changed to be one of the main bases for the Future Foundation to stand against the ambition of Dio Brando. Hundreds, if not thousands, were supposed to be housed in this place.

A handful of deaths and a battle between fourteen (Bandai having died without doing anything) people could only do so much damage. Even if they were Stand users themselves.

The walls and floor around Kirigiri were perfectly intact as they had generally been when she had fled the room where Mitarai accomplished Requiem. She ran across passages and contemplated rooms to hide in, all the while she saw and heard Mitarai's face on the monitors around her. That serene expression as he told her of how he could still save her, if she simply stopped and let Hope into her heart.

She made it to Kizakura's corpse and dropped off her notebook before trying to find escape. The monitors made the soft footsteps of Mitarai's walk echo and strike fear into her heart. It was enough to make her normally composed self quiver in fear while she searched and searched for her friends.

In the end, here she was now. Standing face to face with the man who planned all this; all to resurrect his friend and spread their dream across the planet.

Ryota Mitarai just stood there and softly smiled at her while Kirigiri's legs shook and Detective Man had long since vanished. There was no point in fighting or resisting any longer. Kirigiri had no chance of ever defeating Mitarai.

Nor did she desire to.

"Mitarai," Kirigiri dropped to her knees, ignoring the pain of the drop, and fell to a familiar position. The same bow she gave to Dio back at Hope's Peak. "Forgive me. I call myself a detective and yet I failed to see the obvious. Failed to see the world you want to create. I tried to hurt you and insult your vision. Please forgive me."

It was humiliating, but also the only way to atone for her sins. Kirigiri had spent all this time acting, and believing, that she was saving the world from a madman's ego. In reality, all she had done was fight to bring about Despair among mankind and stifle the dreams of one of the greatest men she'd ever met. To look away from the truth in front of her.

Mitarai wanted to create a world of happiness. Where no one knew of pain and suffering and could instead understand and care for one another. A world without tragedy.

He had explained it so many times now and it was only now that Kirigiri understood. The shame was enough that she'd have crashed her head against the floor a dozen times if Mitarai told her to. It
was the least she could do.

If her plan had worked, she'd have broken his arm and completely ruined his dream. She'd be giving the world over to a madman like Munakata, or a deluded idealist like Naegi. He may have been her friend, but she now knew who the superior man was.

Naegi, Asahina, her friends, both past and present, and even her family. All of them combined meant less to her than Mitarai did now.

He warmly chuckled at her display, "It's okay. The worst you really did was sprain my arm. You've got a good grip, it'll be useful for what you'll have to do."

 Anything for you." Kirigiri said, in awe of his generosity.

Mitarai laughed to himself again.

"To think that this is the power of Requiem. No wonder Izuru Kamukura managed to summon it even inside the Neo-World Program. But anyway, it's obvious that Naegi and Asahina won't agree with my vision unless we bring them to the brink. There's no time for me, especially since the surface is going to need me." He said.

"I'll do it," Kirigiri moved her head up so that she could actually look him in the eye. "I'll show Naegi my Sin and tell him to run in the hallways. He'll choose me over himself, and Asahina should fall into Despair after that."

"Naegi shouldn't have to die. Just because he's the false Ultimate Hope, it doesn't mean killing is the answer." Mitarai replied, scolding her like a teacher to a student. She blushed from the embarrassment.

"How do we handle him then? Without the Sins, he may try something. His Livin' On A Prayer may corrupt some people outside. If we handle him now, at worst, Dio's Holy Diver can simply revive him again." Kirigiri said pleadingly. Mitarai didn't deserve to be troubled by this.

Mitarai sighed and said, "Maybe, but it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Like eating food that's just slightly undercooked. We'll go with something else. The Sins can be deactivated from my phone, if I give you this," He reached into his jacket and pulled out a phone; much smaller and older-looking than his own. Kirigiri sat up on her knees and took the phone in hand. "Call the number when Naegi is about to kill himself and I'll deactivate the Sins. The fact that he could do nothing and had to be saved by the mercies of his enemy will shake him. That's when I'll save him."

"A plan that defeats all your enemies and yet saves them as well. If it weren't for the existing failings of the people here, you'd have created a bloodless coup without opposition." Kirigiri spoke with nothing but the purest admiration for Mitarai. "Who'd have thought I'd see the true Ultimate Hope from all this?" She asked rhetorically.

"That's what Dio said too. I said I believed him, that what we did was right because we knew it was right, but my heart was always torn. Now? There is no doubt nor Despair. There is no one who I cannot reach."

As he said that, Mitarai extended out his arms and his Stand Requiem emerged from behind him, lighting the hallways with a warm white light.
It was humanoid and completely covered in that very same white light, which was bright enough that Kirigiri felt it wrap itself around her and pull her attention towards it. Mitarai's very skin seemed to lighten up as well; he looked more like the angels depicted in popular culture. Utterly awe-inspiring and perfect in their divinity.

The Stand itself was as inspiring as its user. Its face was a mixture of the two men who dedicated themselves to reaching Heaven so that they could save mankind. There was Mitarai's soft and kind-hearted face, but with the cunning eyes and spiked hair of Dio Brando and a certain sharpness that just oozed dominance and charisma. Its body was thin yet defined, closer to a typical fashion model's physique than anything close to Mitarai's underweight form.

It was without a doubt one of the most beautiful Stands that Kirigiri had ever seen.

Her legs shook and she barely managed to get herself to stand up again when facing such a being of complete perfection and wonder. The love in her heart bubbled up and filled up her lungs, replacing all the air and keeping her from speaking. Mitarai himself simply stood with eyes closed. The confidence that no one would try to harm him while he was still so vulnerable was attractive in itself.

Kirigiri had heard of Dio's charisma and how it attracted followers. Yet it was only now, upon experiencing Mitarai's charisma itself, did she truly understand what it meant.

*I wonder if he'd ever truly accept me. If he wouldn't be disgusted by them.* Kirigiri wondered with a slight tinge of fear. Her eyes flickered down to her gloves that hid the hideous slabs of flesh that were her hands.

The only people she ever trusted to show her hands to have been people she considered her family. That even included the survivors of Hope's Peak as well. But would Mitarai even want to see them? They were ugly and burnt and he was going to create a world of perfection and-

"Take them off." Mitarai said with a commanding tone. Kirigiri barely had time to react before he elaborated. "The gloves. Don't put them back on again either. You'll get a new pair when all this is over."

He didn't need to clarify. Kirigiri would have denied him nothing; already wrenching her gloves off and showing him her burnt hands without hesitation. The skin was as smooth as charred flesh could be, after years of treatment, but the texture and sight was still closer to that of rotten meat than human hands.

Maybe that was why she blushed so deeply when Mitarai took her hands within his own without question. He gently stroked them with his thumbs and gazed at them with a genuine curiosity. They didn't even disturb him.

He had let go after a few seconds and turned his back to march to his destiny when Kirigiri grabbed at his shoulder. It was presumptuous of her, especially after what she had done before.

But she wanted at least something more from him.

She barely managed to get the words out when she said, "Before you go, I'd like to ask something. It's embarrassing and entirely unprofessional, but-"

The Ultimate Hope stopped her when he extended a hand and patted her on the head. He just had to give another one of his smiles and Kirigiri was like putty in his hands. She was dipping her head and
hiding her face like a schoolgirl when meeting her crush.

"I think that'll be enough for now. Let's wait until after all this before deciding what we do next." Mitarai said, as he then looked down on his phone. "Naegi and Asahina should be opposite the way I'm going. Just go up about five floors and you'll find them."

Nodding her head, Kirigiri turned and reluctantly let Mitarai out of her sights. To think that she had so little time to make amends with him before accomplishing this task. It was almost unfair if it wasn't his own expressed wishes.

The two parted ways as Mitarai walked towards where he would soon re-enter the surface and lead humanity to its glorious future. Kirigiri herself went to make sure that there would be no emerging rivals for his dream and that included Naegi.

A plan was already formulating in her mind. All she had to do was make Naegi fall into Despair and then send the signal to end the game then. The trauma of nearly taking his own life, just as the game seemed to end, would shake his resolve and Asahina's as well. The stage would be open for Mitarai to then reach into their hearts and save them.

Save them as he saved Kirigiri.

The idiocy of her earlier actions still shook her. For someone who called herself the Ultimate Detective, she had been far too slow in realising just how righteous Mitarai's cause was. All that time wasted dashing around, thinking she was doing the right thing, and pretending that simply trying to bring back the old world was any kind of hope.

All this time, she had been searching for the truth, when she had been living a lie. Mitarai had been the one to truly reveal the truth of the world to her.

If she was as smart as she thought she was, she'd have rallied to his side the second she saw that Stand Requiem of his. The power and magnificence of it still made her body shiver in delight. The way the conviction of his words thundered into her ears, smashing any resistance her mind brought up against his points. How much passion was behind those eyes, drawing her in closer, as she slowly found herself mesmerised by his very appearance.

Mitarai did not just win Kirigiri over in mind and body, but in soul as well. It was as if he reached into her heart and pulled the rest of herself along with it. After all she had done and said to him, he not only spared her, but saved her as well.

Maybe that's why I find myself falling for him. She thought to herself. Yes, she was finding herself smitten with Mitarai, and why not? He was the greatest man she had ever met.

That was what drove her forward; ready to do her part to save the world. Something so basic and yet also so much greater than her.

Kirigiri was going to help Mitarai bring Hope to the entire world.

Nothing would stop him now.

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In a small supply-room, three people had just heard the stuff of Asahina's nightmares.

Kirigiri had showed them her bracelet and it was just now registering with Asahina that this wasn't some kind of cruel joke or lie. This was the honest truth facing her. Kirigiri's Sin was designed to somehow destroy the unity of the Class 78 survivors, and to kill one of Asahina's best friends.

Gekkogahara seemed shocked into silence, as Monomi said nothing, whilst Naegi still seemed to be processing the news. His mouth was open but no coherent sounds came out, nothing but noise came from him.

Asahina herself was blubbering before she managed to regain her senses.

Even so, she couldn't accept that this was happening! "No. No! It's not true! It can't be true!" She screamed.

"I'm afraid it is. There is no other way. My Sin is that the fourth round is reached and Naegi is still alive." Kirigiri said icily. It was as if she wasn't even bothered by the prospect of death.

But how could Asahina judge? Kirigiri was the one who had to carry this burden for so long! She even lost track of Mitarai and her beloved gloves! To still be so calm and collected, all for their sakes, was a testament of strength!

"Why? Why would Dio's Friend do this?!!" Naegi asked, finally in control. How could someone think of such an awful Sin?

"It's difficult to say, but we simply have to face the facts and accept that this is our choice to make. Either I die, or you die, Naegi." Said Kirigiri, as her bracelet showed the bright light reading out that they were ten minutes from the end.

Ten minutes from the death of one of the most important people to Asahina.

Monomi whimpered. "I'm so sorry, everyone. I wish my Stand could do anything about this, but..." The tiny creature burst into tears from behind the computer screen. "It can only work in sunlight!"

This wasn't fair! Asahina had lost her parents, Sakura, Yuta, and was now going to lose either Naegi or Kirigiri! How could Dio do this? Why did he have to ruin everything? This was all his Friend's fault. Asahina never knew hatred and loathing like the kind she now felt for the Mastermind.

It boiled and shook inside her stomach and poisoned her every thought. She wanted to find the monster behind all this and unleash the full power of The Ocean on them; cut off their oxygen and let the water slowly fill them up to make it easier to rip them to shreds.

Naegi would never know about this. Even now, he'd probably disapprove. But it was just too cruel for Asahina to simply let it slide!

The three of them were finally together again, and now they would never be together again.

It's not fair. Why do we have to be the ones to suffer from Dio's ambition. He corrupts everything. Asahina thought to herself. She could hear soft hiccups as she saw that Naegi was crying just as heavily as she was, although he was trying to fight it more.
Kirigiri sighed and said, "What I'm about to say is something I wished I never had to. Naegi, I know it'll be hard for you to hear but-

"No! I won't let you sacrifice yourself!" Naegi snapped.

"You have to die." She finished.

Asahina couldn't find the words to say and neither could Naegi. Kirigiri took that as a cue to keep speaking.

"It's the only way. I'm close to discovering the truth behind all of this and there's no time to waste. Dio's Friend is slipping through our fingers. Knowing that you will die is what has made me hesitate-prefering to discover the Mastermind myself- but there is no alternative. I'm sorry, Naegi. This has to be done." Kirigiri said, as if she wasn't asking him to die.

It shouldn't have surprised her that Naegi only needed a few seconds before nodding.

"I'm not having anyone else die for me. Too many have done that already." He said.

"W-Wait! There has to be another way! I don't want to lose a friend." Asahina didn't know what other option there was, but it had to be better than this!

"There is no other way. Either I die or Naegi dies." Kirigiri stated without emotion. She turned her attentions fully towards Naegi. "For the sake of Hope, Naegi, you have to do this."

He smiled at her. "Asahina, it's okay. I know this isn't what we wanted, but if it means that Kirigiri has a chance at saving everyone...I'll do it. When we fought Dio, he shattered my ribs with a single punch. I thought I'd die standing up to him, just like Oogami, but we pulled through. Just like you'll all pull through now."

"Exactly. Maybe your Luck will help us out, even after all this. It was always your Talent." The Ultimate Detective smiled with a (too good) attempt at keeping any sadness from it.

"Just an average guy with crazy luck; it's amazing I made it this far." Naegi laughed. Asahina didn't know if it was at himself, or everything that happened ever since he stepped foot into Hope's Peak. "It was all thanks to you, Kirigiri. You and everyone else."

"Carrying you to this point was never a problem." Kirigiri replied. She was speaking as if she was an old person looking back on fond memories.

She and Naegi shook hands and were happy. There was a sense of acceptance in Naegi's eyes as he would soon be literally running towards his death without more than a brief look back and a fond farewell. All to save Kirigiri and give them the chance to bring Dio's Friend to justice.

Why did this feel so wrong? Not just because of the unfairness, but more basic than that. This whole thing felt like it was a play where the characters didn't act like themselves.

Asahina didn't know why she opened her mouth, but her body refused to let this go without letting everything off her chest.

"Why did you leave your gloves behind?" She asked, as if Kirigiri didn't already answer the question. Only, now looking back, the excuse seemed less solid than it had been before. "You'd
show them to me and Naegi, but never to someone like Gekkogahara."

"I didn't know she'd be with you." Kirigiri spoke far too quickly for Asahina's liking. Why was she sweating?

"But you still would have hid them. You would never abandon your gloves," Asahina insisted, before she remembered something Kirigiri had said. A sentence that her friend would never say to Naegi. "You would never say that he had to die for the sake of Hope."

"Asahina, why do you want me to die?" Kirigiri asked.

Even if she was acting weird, Kirigiri was one of Asahina's best friends. The two had grown close ever since the battle at Hope's Peak and had worked together so many times, even when being in separate Branches. To hear her friend accuse her of wanting her dead, just for having questions, was enough to make Asahina gasp in shock.

Tears returned and that was enough for Naegi to stare at Kirigiri with eyes wide open. He was seeing her in a new light now; as Kirigiri herself looked amazed at what she just said.

"That's too far! Asahina has a point! This isn't like you at all!" Naegi protested.

Kirigiri bit her lip and now looked frustrated. "Naegi, you know what must be done. If I die, my blood will be on your hands. We only have minutes left so you need to do this now." She said irritated.

"Maybe we can remove the hand! If I use Livin' On A Prayer, we can stem the bleeding and-"

"It won't work!" Kirigiri snapped and Asahina barely had time to react before the detective let loose on the two of them. "Why are you being so stubborn, Naegi? Are you so afraid of death that you would throw me to the pile of martyrs in your name? Are you nothing more than a false Hope?"

The room turned cold and it was slowly dawning on Asahina that the room was divided between her and Naegi on one side and Kirigiri on the other. It wasn't meant to be like this. Kirigiri only had eight minutes left before the time limit expired and she would die. Maybe that was why she was acting this way? She was scared of death and wanted a way out.

But this wasn't the Kirigiri she knew. The way she was pushing Naegi to sacrifice himself for her, the hostility to Asahina's questions, and now her shoving blame and guilt onto Naegi to make him do what she wanted. She looked and spoke like the Ultimate Detective, but the woman in front of Asahina was definitely not the Kirigiri she knew.

It was like the uncanny valley. So similar and yet the differences were too great.

What could they even do?

"Maybe...maybe we should remove the hand without her permission. If it's the only way to save her and him. Asahina would find a way to save both her friends. She wouldn't fail them like she failed with Gozu!"

It would be painful for Kirigiri and Asahina would understand if she never forgave the swimmer for this, but they had no choice.
"Naegi, get behind me. Gekkogahara, we might need your help." Asahina said with a commanding tone. Gekkogahara made an affirmative noise and tapped certain buttons on her keyboard.

"Asahina, if you get in my way, I won't hesitate to cut you down." Kirigiri warned as she stared into Asahina with almost empty eyes.

Naegi's voice was pure desperation as he said, "What happened to you, Kirigiri? Did Dio's Friend do something to you? Did he mess with your mind. Did he make you fall into Despair? I can still help! Livin' On A Prayer."

"The only thing you're good for is talking. Your hollow words won't reach me now." Kirigiri barked. Her Stand formed behind her and aimed its pistol right at Asahina's head. "This can end in two ways. You commit your Sin, or Detective Man ends you right here and now."

Asahina was fighting back tears. She didn't want this to become a fight. Kirigiri now had seven and a half minutes left before the time limit. If they took off the hand without having time to stop the bleeding, there was a chance that Kirigiri would simply die of blood-loss! What would have been the point of all this then?

The only thing that kept her going was the knowledge that this wasn't the Kirigiri she knew. Dio's Friend did something to her and Asahina wasn't going to let that bastard take away another friend. She wouldn't lose Kirigiri or Naegi.

If the Mastermind had his way, there would be no hope for the outside world. The knowledge that Naegi had killed himself for his friend and that Dio had been avenged would destroy so many people.

All they had to do was restrain Kirigiri, take off the hand with the bracelet, and then stem the bleeding. All in a handful of minutes.

But they had Stands, and a mecha-chair user, and this was in a small room. The fight would be over in minutes.

They just had to try.

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Why wasn't it working?

Livin' On A Prayer was healing Naegi and Asahina's injuries, if at a far slower pace than usual and for some reason wasn't working with Gekkogahara, but it was doing nothing offensively. The Hope Bullets simply hit Kirigiri and changed nothing. The most it was doing was slightly pushing her back whenever Naegi fired his larger shots.

Shots filled with the memories of their friendship and everything they had been through didn't affect Kirigiri one bit.

The room was now soaked in water from The Ocean's frantic efforts at pinning Kirigiri down. It was no surprise that she was running rings around them in speed and tactics. Gekkogahara's chair was letting out sparks and was almost down for the count after Detective Man side-stepped a blast that
slammed against the therapist.

The shelves and drawers were thrown across the floor in order to create barriers, but all it did was make it harder for Naegi to move around. Not for Kirigiri, who easily glided through the roadblocks as if they were nothing. Her Truth Bullets easily cut through and pierced Naegi, Asahina, and Gekkogahara, whenever they made contact.

It was a small miracle that it was nowhere that seriously damaged his mobility. The same couldn't be said for Asahina after The Ocean's legs had secrets she told Kirigiri in confidence (resenting that Komaru lived while Yuta died, and sometimes wondering if they should have surrendered to Dio) and was now lying on the floor. She was crawling her way towards the detective.

This was Dio all over again! They were having to throw everything they had at her and it was barely working. The small environment worked to her advantage and her mind was like a tool that cut through their numbers game.

The only thing they found out was the one behind all this. Kirigiri let it slip when she was talking about how wrong they were about Dio.

Ryota Mitarai was the Mastermind, Dio's Friend, who plotted this whole thing to divide and 'save' the Future Foundation.

Naegi knew what 'save' really meant.

Brainwash them. He'd brainwash them just like he did with Kirigiri. Just like how Class 77-B were brainwashed.

"The fact of the matter is, when in close-quarters, the strongest Stand wins. Intelligence merely shortens the span of time, unless there is an imbalance in intelligence- in which case the outcome becomes uncertain." Kirigiri said, moving closer to Naegi as Detective Man cocked its pistol.

Naegi tried to once again speak to Kirigiri from the heart. It wasn't like he had an alternative. "What did Mitarai do to you? I didn't think Virtual Insanity-"

"The Ultimate Hope has discarded Virtual Insanity. His new Stand is the one that will save this world and all who live in it. It's just a necessity for me to break you." Kirigiri replied.

"If Mitarai has a new Stand, then why do this? Why go to such lengths to kill me, or break me, if he's so confident?" Naegi asked. There had to be a way to break the spell on her. "How can a Stand make you abandon everything you believed in? The Kirigiri I know would never abandon the truth for a comforting lie! She'd never try to murder her friends over this. You have to fight this. Please!"

The Hope Bullets that contained his raw and honest feelings fired out from Livin' On A Prayer's fingers. They soared through the air just as they at Hope's Peak and landed on Kirigiri. Naegi prayed that this would be like with the others. That it would overcome this curse just like it did with Dio's Holy Diver.

But nothing changed.

"Your Hope can only reach those who want to embrace it. Your Stand reaches into the bodies and minds of those in Despair and rescues them, but only when they wish to be rescued. You couldn't stop Dio with it, and the Remnants of Despair rejected you until the Neo-World Program." Kirigiri
placed a hand over her heart. "My heart is filled with Hope, Naegi. Just not your weak Hope. Livin' On A Prayer cannot manipulate the heart."

"No..." Naegi couldn't stop himself from crying again. He was useless! Useless, useless, useless! All he could do was talk and no one was listening!

Kirigiri raised her hands and revealed her bracelet, showing that the timer had just hit one minute, as she said, "I have sixty seconds remaining. I'll make your death quick and painless. Your resurrection will render this meaningless, even if your death was unplanned- Mitarai will understand when I tell him about this."

How could she be speaking like this? Acting like this was nothing more than a troublesome issue, only getting upset when speaking of how disappointed Mitarai would be, as if their friendship meant nothing. Was Mitarai's new Stand so powerful? Could it even be a Requiem?

If so, then how could he even be stopped?

There has to be a way. There has to be some way of bringing her back. Naegi had to be bold. Hope Bullets didn't work on Class 77-B either, but they still found hope in the end. They freed themselves from Dio's control.

The Neo-World Program could work on Kirigiri. She could discover the truth about what Mitarai did to her and go back to her normal self again. All Naegi had to do was work up the courage to somehow get Kirigiri down and then take off that hand. But how?!

His answer came in the form of a giant bullet of water. A single sharp blow that slammed against the back of Detective Man and sent it flying, carrying Kirigiri in its current as well, as the two shot forward and slammed against the wall. Naegi's back had been to the door and his luck had saved him from being caught in the blast.

Not that banging his head against the wall helped, after stumbling back from the show of force.

"I'm not giving up that easily! Even if we've only got sixty seconds, we can still change this. Mitarai may think he's Hope, but he's just another one of Dio's pawns. We'll save you, Kirigiri." Asahina yelled from the ground. The Ocean's lower half was a puddle of water that carried its upper half, while its eyes carried the same determination as its user.

Naegi heard the sound of sparking circuits and whirring engines and remembered that it wasn't just him and Asahina committing to the fight.

"It's time for Gekkogahara's Ultimate Attack! Shining Blade of Justice!" Monomi declared at the right arm rest opened up and revealed a different kind of weapon. Most of Gekkogahara's weapons had been guns of some kind, but this was a circular saw the size of his torso.

Kirigiri was already falling to the floor when Gekkogahara dashed forward with the saw being positioned just right. Naegi crawled back to avoid getting in Gekkogahara's way, or being attacked by Kirigiri.

Detective Man had just enough control over its fall to aim its pistol straight for Gekkogahara's head. "Miaya Gekkogahara is not in this room!" Kirigiri shouted.

The Truth Bullet was fired at the same time as the saw beginning to move upwards to Kirigiri.
Time slowed down as Naegi felt a mixture of regret and horror; regret at how this had to end with Kirigiri, and horror at the Truth Bullet going straight for Gekkogahara's head. He pitied the Ultimate Therapist, but appreciated her efforts.

Yet there was something strange. Naegi wasn't nearly as smart as Kirigiri, but even he noticed that the way that saw was moving was strangely suspicious.

*The blade's trajectory. It doesn't look like it'll take off her wrist. It looks like it'll go straight for her-Heart.*

Her heart and probably take out her left rib-cage and lung while at it. Naegi's pupils shrank to the size of a pin-head as he saw the screen with Monomi move up and turn to face him. Everything became so obvious that he wanted to hit himself until he was unconscious because he only noticed it now.

Gekkogahara was shy, yes, but so shy that she didn't say a single word since all this began? Had she ever been in a combat mission, or any mission, that justified having the kind of weaponry on her wheelchair? Did she even need a wheelchair in the first place?

What if the girl before him wasn't Gekkogahara. What if it was in fact someone else?

His nightmares came true when the screen became static and revealed a face he only ever saw in photos, but feared almost as much as Dio Brando himself. The green hair, the yellow and green clothes so outrageously styled that only one person could ever make it work, and she was not that man, and the look of pure joy and mockery in those eyes. Those eyes that delighted in Despair. The only lights were inside whatever vehicle she was in and the blurred red skies by nearby windows, almost looking as if she was flying somewhere.

What had he done?

"Makoto Naegi; please accept this gift. A final offering from Monaca Towa before she leaves this boring planet!" Monaca's eyes gleamed with a terrible delight as she clapped her hands and grinned. It extended far past her eyes and made her look like a monster, instead of a child corrupted by Dio. "The death of this evil demonic minion!"

"No!" Naegi barely got the word out before hearing the sound of metal cutting through flesh.

Asahina sent every last drop of water into the room and had form a sphere around Gekkogahara and threw the machine to the other side of the room. A loud crash filled the room as the wheel-chair shattered into pieces and Gekkogahara's lifeless body collapsed onto the floor. The Truth Bullet was still wedged into her skull.

But the job was done. The saw had not only cut cleanly through Kirigiri's left hand, letting the bracelet slip off, but cleaved through from the middle of her left torso to the space between her right shoulder and her throat. Blood gushed out from her wound and Naegi saw too many white outlines to think that the gash wasn't deep.

Naegi ran and Asahina crawled towards Kirigiri and he just managed to catch her before she hit the ground. He caught her in his arms and gently laid her back on the ground and concentrated as hard as he could to stemming the bleeding. They still had thirty seconds! Livin' On A Prayer could do it.
It was meant to be the Stand that defeated Dio Brando! It must be able to heal Kirigiri’s wounds and save her now, right?

What was the point otherwise?

"Kirigiri! Please, talk to me. You're going to be fine. Livin' On A Prayer can heal these wounds." Naegi promised, Livin' On A Prayer's ahoge lighting up and humming. It was already managing to lessen some of the bleeding. "You just have to-"

"Shut up." Kirigiri growled, Asahina gasping and Naegi unable to speak. She forced her head up and looked at Naegi with hate-filled eyes. "I will be saved by Mitarai and Dio, when you have been shown the true way, and they reach Heaven. I refuse to go out mewling thanks to you for keeping me alive."

"No! Kirigiri, please!" Asahina begged. Naegi would have begged too- begged for her to realise that she had to have hope, or else the Stand wouldn't work-if it meant she would fight to live.

She wouldn't. She had such faith that Mitarai would win, and in his cause, that she was rejecting the chance to survive.

Munakata was right about him! How could Naegi call himself the Ultimate Hope when everyone around him was dying and he could do nothing to stop it? Kirigiri was dying in his arms, cursing his name, and the best he could offer was pleas and platitudes. It was his fault that Kirigiri had fallen into Despair.

"Naegi," She whispered. "I want you to know one thing."

He knew it wouldn't be anything kind, or heart-warming. Mitarai's Stand had corrupted her completely. Yet it was a testament to his naivety that he was still shocked by the cruelty in her eyes.

"You'll overcome this," She hissed mockingly. "It's not like your friends dying ever held you back. After all, you truly are the Ultimate Hope, right?"

Those were the final words of Kyouko Kirigiri when a familiar chime sang through the room and both Naegi and Asahina couldn't stop themselves from bitterly crying at the sound. They knew what it meant. It meant that they had failed, even as they now did their best to seal the wounds and heal whatever Monaca had cut.

It wasn't fair! How could Mitarai think that this was right? How did Dio keep attracting these people to his banner that could make this war so painful? Naegi couldn't even fight off the sleeping poison that could seal Kirigiri's fate. Her skin was too pale and wounds too fatal for her to even take advantage of them being asleep.

Asahina fell screaming, but Naegi fought the darkness and focused entirely on healing what he could. Even if it meant she'd kill him, he was still doing his best to save her. Even when it was useless.

In the end, that's what it- and he- was. A useless failure that couldn't even save one of his friends.

Naegi's last thoughts before he fell unconscious were of his best friend.
"Yoi-cha-Izayoi? What are you doing?" Ruruka asked hesitantly.

Seiko and her had already killed Kizakura, the man in his death throes by the time Ruruka chased their other enemy down. The two ended up right in the same hallway where Seiko and Izayoi fought over her. The traitor had the nerve to say he wouldn't fight her and that he still loved her.

Ruruka refused to believe that anyone against a world of certainty loved her. Yet Izayoi had the sweet she had thrown at him in anger- demanding he eat it if he loved her even when refusing to join Dio- in his hand and was raising it towards his mouth.

He was bleeding all over from her nails and teeth, and still refused to fight back. All because of their love, according to him.

If he loved me, he wouldn't fight me. He'd join me and Seiko in serving Lord Dio and Mitarai. Ruruka's mind hissed, although she felt unsure about that. What was e thinking?

"It's as you said. How can you ever trust the words of someone who hurt you? How can you believe that I love you?" Izayoi shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ruruka, but I can never join someone like Dio. Before you were brainwashed, you'd understand why."

"Because of everyone getting hurt. Everyone turned on each other and there was so much death and pain and suffering. It was frightening.” Ruruka spoke quietly. She remembered why she had joined the Future Foundation.

"Who could ever want to live in such a world?" Yoi asked. Ruruka didn't have time to explain, before he continued. "Maybe Dio had a way to heal all the pain. Or Mitarai knows how to destroy Despair. I'm not that smart to figure it out. But I don't want to live in a paradise built on top of a foundation of corpses and blood."

"Sins can be erased!" Ruruka yelled. It was okay to do bad things, if you could then take them back, right?!

"Not all of them. Some sins, even when the effect is negated, stay with you forever." Izayoi said. He took a step towards her and extended his arms out. "I always loved your sweets. Whenever you looked at Kimura jealously, feeling as if your Talent was nothing compared to hers, I wanted to tell you what they meant to me. How much I loved how you poured attention into each and every one of them. How you bathed in the smiles and affections of others. You were like the sun to my moon."

He was crying. Tears were falling down his face and he was still smiling. Why was he smiling when he was putting that sweet so close to his mouth?! He was going to die if he let it touch his mouth! Not even peacefully, but painfully just like how Bandai died!

But that was what a traitor deserved, right? Yoi-ch-Izayoi hurt her because he couldn't resist Sugar Sugar. He didn't love her enough to fight it, right? He refused to join her in serving Lord Dio's vision of a world without uncertainty and where everyone could be happy. Surely she should be glad that he at least wasn't fighting.
Even so! Ruruka was joining her boyfriend and closest companion since childhood in crying. She couldn't stop herself! Her heart was meant to be filled with resolution and she had never been more hesitant than she was now!

Maybe he didn't have to die. Maybe there was another way.

*Oh God, he's about the eat the sweet!*

Ruruka screeched from the top of her lungs, "Yoi-chan, no! I changed my mind! You don't have to eat-"

It was too late. Yoi-chan had already eaten one of the sweets that Ruruka would spend so much time crafting for the consumption of one man; the man who she loved. The sweet that represented her Talent and everything about her. The sweet that would now murder him.

And Yoi-chan was still smiling at her.

"It's delicious like always." He spoke softly and took another step towards her. He was so close and would soon be so far away from her. "I'm sorry that this had to happen. Ruruka, please know that I made this choice. I'm doing this to free you from Dio's evil forever."

The bracelet made its little song and the poison seeped into Yoi-chan's body. His left side was already turning purple as the poison coursed through his veins and shut down his bodily functions. He stumbled to the side and grabbed onto the wall for support as he lost vision in his left eye, which was now entirely red. What kind of sick torture was this?!

Ruruka dashed over to Yoi-chan's side and held him gently in her arms. Why did he do such a thing? Why didn't he simply just accept Ruruka and join Lord Dio? Was death so preferable that he would betray her for it?

But had he betrayed her? Was he not doing this for her?

Of course he betrayed us! He refused to- Ruruka's mind silenced itself. She shook her head violently and exiled those evil, sick thoughts from her mind. How could she ever believe that her beloved Yoi-chan would ever turn his back on her willingly! *Shut up! Yoi-chan would never betray me! He loved me! Even after I betrayed him and corrupted him, he still loved me as if I was everything to him! And now I killed him. This is all my fault!*

Ruruka must have been loud in her bitter weeping, as Yoi-chan lifted his right hand and held her face. He wiped away the tears on the left side of her face and smiled. "Don't blame yourself...if you can fulfil one final request, selfish as it is....please don't blame yourself." Yoi-chan asked, so calm in the face of death. Being cool and collected was always his thing. "I'd like to see your smile at least one more time, before dying."

How could she deny him such a simple thing?

It should have been easy to smile. It supposedly used less muscle than frowning and definitely used less than long and choked weeping. Yet it was so hard for Ruruka to actually make her smile a genuine one. One filled with warmth and kindness and joy from the memories they shared together.

What she offered was something small and simpering. Nothing compared to what he had given her
"It's beautiful. Beautiful like you." Yoi-chan pushed himself forward into her arms, putting his strength into his legs to keep her from supporting his weight. "Ruruka, I love you."

"I love you too...Yoi-chan." Ruruka whispered before putting her lips against his. The disgusting taste of poison was nothing to Ruruka, compared to the soft touch of Yoi-chan's lips against hers.

She felt his body relax and get heavy against her and fought back the tears. There was no denying it.

Sonosuke Izayoi had died in her arms.

How was this meant to be Hope? Yoi-chan fought and died believing that he was doing what was right for himself, the world, and Ruruka. His last moments were spent making sure that she was alright and did not blame herself. Was she meant to feel hopeful at his passing? How was he an enemy to a better world?

Ruruka began to wonder just how it was that The Tragedy was meant to bring about a kinder world. Was it worth the mountains of corpses, the blankets of fire, and the oceans of blood that poured across the world and engulfed everything in Despair? What sort of hope would come from such an awful thing?

Wasn't seeing horrors like those why Ruruka and Yoi-chan joined the Future Foundation? Is that not why they endured the endless battles and failures? All the certainty they had was that the next day would be worst than the last because of Dio. Their happiest moment in years had been when Class 78 had managed to defeat and slay Dio Brando at Hope's Peak.

What sort of hope had Mitarai given her? Seiko seemed no less obsessed and desperate than she had been when under Sugar Sugar's control. Ruruka had been even worse to Yoi-chan than he had been to her under the very same Stand.

Mitarai's techniques had done nothing to change the curse Ruruka accidentally unleashed! No, in fact, he made it even worse!

This is supposed to be what creates Heaven? I'm supposed to be happy because Yoi-chan will come back? She shook her head ferociously, expelling the very idea from her mind. No! This isn't Hope! Why would I ever take a path without him?! Why would I ever swear loyalty to Dio?

Ruruka felt angry; she was furious at Dio, Mitarai, Seiko, Yoi-chan, herself and just about everything and everyone in this cruel and unforgiving world. A world where people like Yoi-chan, who would never betray her, died and traitors could easily get away with it.

As the bracelet hummed another song to signify that Ruruka would be knocked out, she refused to go out gently and quietly. Not after what Dio and Mitarai did to her. After what she did to Yoi-chan.

With her boyfriend in her arms, she let out a scream of raw emotion. Pain, fury, and sorrow all echoed throughout the hallways and gradually grew quieter and quieter as Ruruka's head grew heavy and her eyes droopy.

Everything became darkness, even before she fell to sleep.
So you've finally known the Despair I have faced.

Munakata watched from the control room as Naegi and Asahina wept over the corpse of Kyouko Kirigiri. The few cameras that Munakata hadn't sabotaged were showing similar scenes throughout. Andou’s, however, had her screaming at Kimura and filling her with the dust emitted by her Stand. Understandable, considering that Izayoi had passed and Kimura’s state likely made her insensitive.

Not all of the cameras could be shut down in time. It had to be done to avoid Mitarai's new Stand, but it meant he was blind throughout most of the building. An unfortunate necessity on Munakata's end, as he finally realised just what Tengan had meant. He didn't mean that all of the Future Foundation were corrupt from the start, but merely that they were all open to it. Exposed to Mitarai’s brainwashing techniques.

*But what about you, Yukizome? Was it truly you who murdered those children?* That had happened before this 'Final Killing Game' started. Yukizome had killed those innocents with a smile on her face from the start.

He tightened his grip on the phone as he stared down at the screen. The details of all the Sins were left open for him to read, not that any of them beyond Naegi's were of any meaning. Mitarai would likely de-activate the bracelets just before reaching the outside. All to soothe his conscience by sparing someone else.

It wouldn't work. Munakata fought a seemingly hopeless battle before and he would do it again. Andou seemed free of the brainwashing now, and her Stand could handle Kimura, while all he had left to do was eliminate Naegi and Asahina. The former's weakness was apparent.

He'd try and have the Remnants of Despair join their efforts. Dio's moles could not be allowed into the organisation again, if they even survived the ambush Munakata had planned. All he needed to do was eliminate the hollow hope of Makoto Naegi, Asahina's death being a necessary evil, and the Future Foundation could be re-built.

The new resistance would prevent Mitarai from corrupting the world as he had done with the Future Foundation.

*First, I need to end this...*

Munakata pressed the button that activated the speakers for the room holding Kirigiri's body and spoke into the microphone. "Makoto Naegi," He used a level tone. His words would be cutting enough. "Do you understand how futile your platitudes, your Stand, is against Despair? Dio's Friend corrupted her, and his protege killed her, and you can only sit and hold her in your arms?"

If these were gentler times, he might have felt a pang of pity for Naegi. Perhaps their bond was like that of himself and Yukizome, so long ago, before all this...despair.

"It's time to end this. Which of our hopes is the true hope?" He asked, laying the challenge down to Naegi.

Mitarai would easily manipulate Naegi; who would try to talk first before fighting. Dio's friend had likely learned from the mistakes of Hope's Peak and wouldn't hesitate to bend Naegi to his will as he
had done with Kirigiri. Someone stronger had to make the necessary sacrifice.

The broadcast tower in the Future Foundation building had to be destroyed. Without it, there was no way for Mitarai to spread his influence across the world. Munakata was ready to sacrifice his life if it meant destroying that tower, doubly so if it somehow took Mitarai out with it.

_I can no longer be the face of Hope, or of the Future Foundation._ Andou would have to be the ceremonial leader. No one could look at Munakata's face and find hope in it. His face now looked too gaunt and scarred, the right side of his face resembling a skull with patches of skin and flesh, for him to be inspiring. _I had wanted to become the Headmaster of Hope's Peak Academy._

Now he was trapped in an eternal battle against the forces of Dio and Despair. It was a war that he accepted would take his life, maybe even today.

Maybe he would be allowed to see the Sakakura and Yukizome of his school-days one more time. To remember what it was like before his world became corrupted and cruel.

_I will soldier on. It's what I have to do._ Munakata was the world’s last hope. If he allowed Mitarai to broadcast his message, then the entire world would fall to the Despair of domination under the boot of Dio Brando.

Naegi and Asahina had already left their room, after covering Kirigiri’s body with her blood-stained jacket. Munakata left the control room and readied himself for the final battles ahead.

Once again, he briefly lamented that the cameras were destroyed. He might have been able to find Mitarai and intercepted him before leaving the building. A swift cut of his blade and the nightmare would have been over in an instant.

_But I had to. If I dared to keep those cameras on, and risk Mitarai’s Requiem._ Munakata felt his heart drop in his chest. He shivered at the memory of the grip on his blade loosening and his resolve shaking. The cameras had to be destroyed. _He would have defeated me without even seeing me._

A Stand Requiem was truly a power like none other. If he survived this, then Izuru Kamukura's new power would also have to be prevented from reaching the world; just as much as Mitarai's had to be. To have broken someone like Kirigiri to his will was no small task and the animator did it as easily as taking a single step forward.

_Killing In The Name_ hovered behind Munakata as he marched towards his fate. If he succeeded, he knew and accepted that those in the future would debate whether he did the right thing. That was more than an acceptable price to pay for the eradication of Despair.

He would discard everything in the name of Hope. His friends, his conscience, and even his memories themselves, all for the sake of a world of peace and hope.

What was his life compared to that?

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Mitarai inhaled and exhaled deeply as he took his first steps outside. The walls had long since been blasted open and the open air blew past Mitarai's face. It was refreshing after so many hours spent
underground with only artificial lights to guide the way.

He had already deactivated the bracelets from his phone. It had been just after the fourth time limit had passed and everyone was now asleep. The Final Killing Game had ended in a total victory for Hope; Mitarai now making his way to the outside world where his army would be waiting for him.

This army was made up of the Future Foundation forces that were supposed to be attacking Jabberwock Island and a few nearby garrisons that protected the Headquarters from attack. Men and women who had fought against Ultimate Despair and thought they were pillars of hope in a dark world. Now they were truly what they professed to be.

The skies above were still red with dark clouds, but that was to be expected. This wasn't like Towa City. The scars of The World's End still marred this place. Not that it would last for long. It was just a matter of time before Dio would return and put an end to that terrible sky.

Mitarai emerged and was met with by a chorus of cheers. His troops had reacted well to the sudden meeting point, tents already being propped up and strong-points established in case there were any rogue units who didn't, or only pretended to, see Mitarai's anime. It was an organisational beauty.

So everyone has seen The Eyes of Heaven. Everyone's finally been saved. Mitarai softly laughed to himself. The day he had been waiting for had arrived. The day that so many people had given their lives for. Dio, you always said my Talent would deliver humanity from Despair.

Before, Mitarai had been plagued by doubt about that. He relied on Dio to be the rock by which he depended on, even after his friend had died. Well, that would be no more. Ryota Mitarai would never be that snivelling dependent ever again.

The power of a Stand Requiem had removed all uncertainty from him and only left a certain serenity. Like a man who achieved enlightenment and now glided above all problems.

Virtual Insanity could only ever alter the body and mind. The mind that relied on the limitations of the body and was only skin-deep, compared to the soul. That was what made his Requiem so much greater. It didn't just effect the body and mind, but the heart as well. It could remove all Despair and leave only Hope.

It was truly a Stand worthy of someone who would bring about an end to Despair.

But first, Mitarai wanted to see if his companion was able to survive its duty. He turned to two nearby guards and decided to see if they knew anything.

"Where's Pet Shop?" He asked. If everything else had gone well, then why not expect the same for this? "The falcon. Its Stand allowed it to create ice."

"We're sorry, sir," The soldier to the left said. Mitarai knew then that this hadn't been a priceless victory. "The falcon was brought down by Byakuya Togami and Yasuhiro Hagakure. Its wounds were too great and it perished before we could arrive. Both have been detained in one of the tents, Togami's too injured to move, and we were waiting for your orders."

Mitarai sighed and let the negativity flow out of his body. Despair would only cloud his body. "Have Togami treated. I want as few deaths as humanly possible. Have him watch the anime as soon as he's regained conciousness. Make sure Hagakure sees it at the same time as well."
"Yes sir." The soldier to the right replied, saluting Mitarai as he walked forward. He could hear their whispers even as the crowd cheered for him. "Having the guy who killed Pet Shop treated? And given a chance to be saved. Mitarai really is the Ultimate Hope." The soldier said.

"Why'd you think Lord Dio was his friend? It was obvious he'd be so kind." His friend pointed out. Both men sounded so amazed to have met him.

Was this how Dio felt every day? To have such natural charisma and confidence in himself that being given sincere compliments felt as natural as breathing? If so, Mitarai finally knew why Dio was always so happy with himself. He couldn't stop himself from having an almost cocky smile on his face as he waved to the crowd and basked in their glory.

He didn't even worry about Kirigiri not contacting him yet.

Kirigiri, I trust that you'll handle things. If you've failed, Mitarai barely gave it a second thought. He couldn't let himself fall back into doubt again. He wouldn't let another sacrifice be in vain. Pet Shop wasn't going to be the only one who Dio would have to bring back. What's one more to the count?

Dio would understand when he finally had the body he deserved. It wouldn't be something desperate like Komaru's either, but his original body restored once more, which would probably improve his mood. The sacrifices necessary for Heaven would soon end here/

All Mitarai needed now was time to completely finish readying the world for Dio and his resurrection would begin.

That was when he heard a certain voice muttering just up ahead. One of five people who easily stood out in a crowd of similarly-dressed people, apart from them.

"I-I-Is that him?" A stuttering, nervous voice asked. A voice he recognised from the broadcast of the Mutual Killing Game.

The Towa City Rescue Team's eyes were glowing soft white, just as everyone else's were, as a clear sign that they had indeed watched The Eyes Of Heaven. That was good. Mitarai had wanted to make sure that they were willing to follow his commands, if things had gone terribly wrong in the Killing Game.

They all had seemed concerned with hiding out within the crowd. Such a contrast to their usual chaotic selves, although the reason was obvious. Komaru almost destroyed Dio utterly, Fukawa had resisted him for years, and Rohan knew that he had been a bully to Mitarai. They all probably feared the worst from him.

But the Ultimate Hope knew better than to be cruel. How could he erase humanity's despair, if he let it control him?

"Rohan Kishibe? Komaru Naegi?" Mitarai raised a hand and waved them over, inviting them in like old friends. "You don't have to be shy. Come on over!" He cried out, already walking towards them.

Komaru jumped in her skin and grabbed onto Fukawa's right arm. "Ah! Mitarai's calling us? Touko, what do we do? What if he's mad at me for..."

"Get on your knees and beg forgiveness! Maybe he'll get turned on and-" Fukawa stopped and, under her breath, she said, "If it helps, he does look like Naegi a bit."
"Touko!" Komaru shouted. Mitarai couldn't help but blush at Fukawa's words.

He may be Hope, and free of all doubts, but he wasn't free of all inhibitions! He wasn't the kind of person who went for that kind of sexual harassment!

"Quick! He's staring. Everyone bow!" Oingo, the elder of the Oingo Boingo Brothers, commanded.

All five of them bowed down to waist-level. The brothers seemed the most willing to show humility and loyalty, but that might have been because they were more co-ordinated. Mitarai knew Rohan’s reputation, and guessed that Komaru and Fukawa weren't the most organised people.

Still, they were loyal and followed orders. That was good. But Mitarai raised a hand regardless.

"That won't be necessary. Just tell me where some of the others are. Have you encountered the ex-Warriors of Hope yet, even just Monaca?" He asked, hoping that he could help Monaca as well.

Rohan spoke up for the group this time. Although, from the way he frowned, he clearly didn't have good news. "We haven't met them yet. Maybe they landed later or earlier than us; we took a ride from Monaca instead of the Future Foundation, and she took off shortly after dropping us off. She ditched some of her computer equipment as well and said something about going to a place free of Hope and Despair."

"Space...that girl. Just when we're about to bring back Dio." Mitarai sighed to himself. That would be a matter for another day, as he turned to give Rohan his full attention. "It's been a while, Rohan." He said, remembering when he read that cruel message that almost crushed his hopes. It was strange seeing Rohan look so ashamed of himself- the memory was making the mangaka grit his teeth.

"Mitarai, about what I said...I hope you can find it in your infinite wisdom and kindness to-"

"It's alright. I heard about some of your stresses, and you probably just took it out on something easy. It's not your fault. Despair simply overcame you, like it does most humans, and you became its tool. The important thing is that you've found Hope." Mitarai replied. There was no need to hold a grudge. Especially as it helped solidify his friendship with Dio.

"What about my brother? Is he okay?" Komaru asked, the fear in her eyes obvious. Lying to her wasn't an option.

"I don't know," Mitarai said. Before she could react, he turned to a nearby soldier and spoke in an authoritative tone. "It's time to end this. Send in the troops. If you find Kimura or Andou, tell them I've ordered them to head for the surface. Anyone else, approach with caution and say you're there to rescue them. They should believe you."

"What happens if they're all dead?" Mitarai kept himself from groaning at the soldier. What kind of a question was that to ask in front of Komaru?

"They shouldn't be. I made sure that this game would have minimal casualties. At worst, Dio can use his Holy Diver to revive them, and we'll have only lost them for a few hours." Mitarai explained slowly and calmly. Before, he might have panicked or stuttered through his words, but now he easily flowed through them like Dio could. "Peace of mind really has saved me. I just wish I acquired Requiem sooner."
"What even happens now?" Fukawa looked at him nervously. Maybe she feared he would punish her and/or Komaru for what happened in Towa City.

It was a fear he put to bed with a single smirk as he said, "We wait for the survivors to come up to the surface and then I'll talk to them. Just talk. Show them the happiness everyone has and explain just what Dio really wanted. After that, once they've been convinced, we can move onto the final phase of my plan. Dio will return and reach Heaven. Then, the world of happiness will come!"

The crowd erupted into loud roar at his words, the Rescue Team included, and Mitarai took a moment to bathe in the glory of it all. This was it! This was the moment he had been waiting for since he first started his anime! The people around him being saved from despair and cheering him for helping them!

He was so close to the end of it all. It was why he didn't bring out his Stand just yet. There was no reason for him to rush what should be the final chapter in the long story of hope against despair. That didn't mean he was unwilling, or afraid, to use it. Mitarai had learnt his lesson about letting fear and inaction rule the day.

If Naegi and whoever else survived were to try and resist, or undermine the world Dio and Mitarai would create, then he would use it. But it wouldn't come to that.

Makoto Naegi wouldn't dare try to challenge him.

He wouldn't. I have become Hope itself and the entire world believes in me. Not even he can stand up against Komaru, if I order her to fight. Mitarai hoped it wouldn't come to that, but he was no longer afraid to get his hands dirty. He would be ready if any of the survivors tried to resist. To think that I will ready this world for Dio even before he reaches Heaven. He'll be so proud when he sees me again.

His old techniques were powerful. They could easily turn a mind upside down and completely re-arrange the values system of certain people. Just like fireworks, they could completely captivate the mind. Just like bombs, they could leave permanent scars that never left.

However, Despair was easier to induce than Hope. Humanity could never conquer the former on its own, that much was obvious. The flaw in this specific programme, which induced loyalty to both Mitarai and Dio, was that it was too weak without a trigger event to enhance the effects. The second there was serious enough head trauma of some kind, the effect would be disrupted.

Like rebooting a computer after a virus infected it.

The entire world may have now seen Mitarai's anime, but there was always the risk that people would break free of the mind control. Break free and try to undermine the world that he and Dio worked so hard and sacrificed so much to create.

But now he had a way to lock in those techniques. He would keep Dio free, of course, so that the way to Heaven would be clear, but everyone else would know hope. His Stand Requiem would ensure that the world and humanity would be saved without any chance of despair returning.

*Humanity's heart will be forever changed. A world free of sadness, fighting, death, and pain. A world where everyone can be happy.* Mitarai walked towards where a command tent had been set-up and looked back at the Towa City Rescue Team. The silent order for them to follow him was followed without question.
If he was lucky, while waiting, he would be able to meet with the former Warriors of Hope. They'd have seen his anime and had their faith in Dio renewed by now, if it ever went away. He wished he could just sit them down and show that their past suffering, and the sacrifices they made in Towa City, hadn't been for nothing.

In a single hour's time, the world would be forever changed as humanity's fate would be guided towards a happier future.

In a single hour's time, Dio Brando would have body once more and show Mitarai the way to reach Heaven.

In a single hour's time, Somebody To Love would reach out to every single person in the world and permanently embed Hope into their minds.

**Kyouko Kirigiri/Detective Man: Dead**  
**Sonosuke Izayoi/Wonderwall: Dead**

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**Stand Stats**

**Somebody To Love (Virtual Insanity Requiem)**  
**User:** Ryota Mitatai  
**Stats**  
Destructive Power C  
Speed B  
Range A  
Durability C  
Precision A  
Developmental Potential C

**Abilities**  
When activated, all those communicating, observing, or listening to the user will begin to associate the user will unmatched admiration and love. The target/s perceive the user as the focal point of their hopes, desires, and ambition, altering them to match the user, and will completely and utterly obey commands given and will act to serve the interests of the user in any way possible, even if it normally goes against their moral code and/or means hurting their friends and family. The user, in becoming the most beloved person to the target, embodies their hope and thus is trusted and served without question. This power does not only affect the body and mind, but also the heart and soul, reshaping it so that the user is the priority to the targets, which makes reversing this control next to impossible.

Stand can be activated by those looking at it; not simply the Stand itself but even images of it via video, depictions from drawings to written word/information about the Stand, and pictures, even if someone is on the other side of the world or is looking at a poor-quality photograph still of the Stand. Those who look at the Stand in these pictures, videos, and/or depictions, even if they cannot see Stands, are affected and will gain both awareness of the user and be affected by the Stand’s power.

Effect only ends when the user is killed and even then entails heavy depression that can worsen without treatment.
"Do you ever imagine life if you hadn't met me?"

"Sometimes. But I don't like to think about it. About whether I'd have been strong enough to have endured Rohan Kishibe's cruelty. Or if I'd still have faith in my Talent."

"Ryota, for so long, I have wondered if I, Dio, would have found what I had been searching for. Could I have unlocked a Stand with my own willpower? Or would it have been forever sealed from me, because of my own instability. I was lost in my mind before I met you."

"I guess your Stand might have been different, reflecting a different side of you. I sometimes wonder which one of my classmates' Stands I have, if I had to swap Virtual Insanity."

"Beat It, You're The Best, Voodoo, Welcome To The Jungle, and Welcome To The Machine. Those are the Stands I would choose from Ultimate Despair. From the Warriors of Hope; Nirvana and Judas Priest."

"Being able to take control of the battlefield, I guess. And discern from friend and foe. With me, it's about reaching out to people. Nudging them away and keeping them from hurting me. She Sells Sanctuary and Land of Confusion."

"So as to stay away from the battlefield and yet still shape it. How very much like you."

"It's not like I can do much else."

"Ryota, the day will come when we take this world. I, Dio, will rule over it as its God, but you will be by my side. There is a strength to you that can be unlocked. Your power, in the right hands, could even overcome Boulevard of Broken Dreams, if used properly."

"...You really do believe in me, don't you?"

"The end is coming. When I end the legacy of Hope's Peak and take command of this world, all will know their Fate. That includes you, Ryota. You'll understand what I mean, when the time comes."

"A better world is coming."

"Yes. The world of Dio will encompass everything. There will be nothing that we won't control."

Naegi and Asahina had found the notebook on Kizakura's corpse, haphazardly shoved into his blazer and half-stained with blood, when they saw the clear bookmark on the last page with writing in it.
Both had been marching through the corridors in broken silence after waking up and receiving
Munakata's challenge. The one who they had believed in so much had been corrupted and they had
failed to save her. She died cursing Naegi's name and all because they let Monaca trick them, and let
Mitarai divide them.

It was only coincidence that they found his torn-apart body, looking like an animal savaged it. He
still had a smile on his face, a rare case for the people in this building. Asahina had already started
walking away when Naegi noticed the paper slipping out from his jacket. His curiosity got the better
of him and he almost broke the book when he realised what it was.

Asahina was already staining the pages with her tears as they read through Kirigiri's findings and
notes. The way that corpses were presented, the Stands of the Future Foundation and the threats they
posed, and finally a page on how to take down Mitarai's Virtual Insanity.

Their attention, however, was focused on the last page. The page that wasn't about evidence or clues
or Sins, but something else.

It was a letter.

Naegi, Asahina, I pray you are the ones to read this.

Ryota Mitarai is Dio's Friend and the one who organised this. The monitors are what is causing
members of the Future Foundation to declare loyalty to Dio Brando, by airing a brainwashing
programme to the bracelet-wearer closest to them. Use that information however you can. I advise
destroying all cameras in the room you decide to sleep in, but it may not matter, with recent
changes.

From what little I've seen of him, I do not believe he wishes to physically destroy the Future
Foundation. He is a different form of evil to Dio; an evil that cannot acknowledge that it is evil or it
will break. However he and Dio met, or became friends, it is not a healthy friendship. I wonder if
Dio tricked him and now Mitarai is trapped in a cycle of guilt, grief, and sin, unable to break out as
he is constantly searching for justification. Searching for a way to vindicate his actions and make it
'right'.

But that is not why I am writing this message.

I lost. I confronted Mitarai and failed to stop him using the Stand Arrow he introduced into this
game. His Stand Requiem is just as powerful as Don't Stop Me Now. The power to warp the very
heart and soul of another to his whims. To make himself the most important person to someone.
Detective Man stood no chance and I failed to discover this ability until it was too late.

I feel it. The admiration for his tactics, awe at the power of his Stand, respect for his principles, love
for his looks and personality, and fear for what will happen if I do not join him. These are my last
thoughts that belong to myself before I am fully corrupted by Somebody To Love.

Before I become your enemy.

He may use me as a weapon, especially given my Sin, or use to drive you two into Despair. I can
only give one piece of advice.

Do not give in to Despair. I chose this fate because I wanted to protect you and had faith in your
abilities to move forward and act for hope.

So many people rely on you, Naegi, and I am unashamed to say I was one of them. Your optimism and hope is what will save humanity, no matter what Mitarai- and soon myself- think and/or say. You must not lose hope. It's only when you give up and stop fighting, as Mitarai did with Dio, that despair will win. If I die fighting you, it is only because I died here when my soul is lost, instead of anything you did to protect yourself.

Asahina, I must ask you to take up my burden. Naegi is the Ultimate Hope, but also needs help with the burden and with avoiding danger with his life intact. You're his friend just as much as I am and I have faith that you can protect and guide him. I wish I could have done half the things you suggested we do after this was all over, but I have accepted this as a necessary step towards stopping him. There is nothing more I can do.

I've placed this message inside Kizakura's jacket. If I bring it with me, I'll likely show Mitarai it and then you'll never see this message. I simply have to have faith that you will come across his body and see my testament. You two will likely be heart-broken- and I'm sorry- but the both of you will have to show strength.

All I can ask you two is to not lose hope, defeat Mitarai, and live the long and fulfilled lives you deserve. The same applies to Togami, Fukawa, Hagakure, and the Hostages that Dio held against us. I only wish I can be there to see it.

Fukawa knows where to find my will. Other than that, I leave my spirit and goals to you two so that we can still stop Mitarai and put an end to this long and painful war.

I hope you can see my genuine self one more time, whether I die or remain infected by Somebody To Love. Remember, you mustn't lose hope or hesitate. That is all I ask and you'll do right by me.

Thank you for trusting me, helping me, and always having faith in me.

...So this is how it feels.

Kyouko Kirigiri.

Naegi and Asahina turned to face one another after seconds of weeping silence. Both pairs of eyes were tear-soaked and filled with mourning, but not like the depressed march of before until they had seen Kizakura's corpse, and this notebook. The sources of answers and solutions for the problems they faced.

It was true. Kirigiri had always been their friend and wouldn't have wanted them to wallow in their misery. If they did, they would never be able to overcome Munakata, let alone Mitarai. She put it all on the line to have faith in them ending this nightmare.

There was no one else left who could do it. The Kirigiri they knew gave everything up to give them this final push. So that they would be reminded of what it was they were fighting for. To simply give up or fall into despair...it would spit on everything Kirigiri had done for them!

Kirigiri, I promise you, Naegi felt a familiar fire inside him again. The fire that refused to go out as long as Dio's insanity was tormenting the world around them. I won't fall into despair! Neither will Asahina. We're going to stop Munakata, and then we'll bring Mitarai and Monaca to justice. We won't let you down!
They turned and walked towards their destiny. The battle with Munakata was only the first of their problems now, if they wanted to save the world.

Because they certainly weren't going to give up now!

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"Dio!" Munakata crashed his blade against nearby debris. It took three strokes before the stone gave way, as he screamed, "Dio! Dio! Dio! DIOOOOO!!"

Munakata and Killing In The Name were cutting apart everything around them, their mutual screams echoing throughout the hallways. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, just about anything inorganic that their blades could slice apart was a victim to his anger. His roaring rage against all that had happened, unleashed after forcing them down for so long.

He was furious with everything. Sakakura, Yukizome, Tengan, the corruption of the old Hope's Peak, the Tragedy and all the horrors it entailed, but most of all at himself! Munakata just wanted to destroy everything in sight and let out the feelings he kept hidden for so long!

To lament everything that had been destroyed in less than a day, and everything that had been destroyed since this all began.

He murdered her! Chisa would never butcher children. She would have never betrayed us, until Dio corrupted her! Just as he ruined everything else in this world! Munakata was chopping at the wall to his left with his sword, again and again, before he accepted that it wouldn't give way. He collapsed to the ground and slammed his fist against the floor. I loved you so much. I would have done anything; but I never noticed. I didn't want to believe it. And now you're gone and Dio is tormenting us again.

The Chisa Yukizome he knew had ceased to exist long ago. The sweet and kind woman who showered him with affection, who could see through his stoic exterior, and always believed in a better world had been replaced by a monster. A monster who slaughtered children and then wept over their corpses, begging Munakata to rid the world of despair.

Did she yearn to see her lover cutting down her wards? Was it a trap? Or was his zealotry her goal?

He didn't know. All he knew was that the Chisa Yukizome he loved had died, and he had tried to pretend that he did not care. He thought that simply burying the memories deep down would make the pain leave. That he could simply pretend that the knife in his back and hole in his heart meant nothing.

But it did! It meant something because he trusted her. Because he loved her just as much as she loved him!

Now he was in a dark and ruined hallway with Makoto Naegi and Aoi Asahina; all three of them bloodied and bruised from the battle. Their bracelets had been removed while they slept and there was nothing to limit their battle. Asahina could take as many punches and kicks as she could stand, Naegi could flee down hallways, and no door could stop Munakata.

The two managed to hold him off during their battle, but Munakata only lost his advantage when the
floor collapsed and the three ended up trapped under rubble or injured their arms. Munakata still had to hold back hisses of pain whenever he moved his left arm.

He still had his right hand to beat Naegi with, demanding to know how he thought he could just act like Kirigiri had done no wrong, saying that his words were as hollow as ever. It wasn't as if he had to land the killing blow like Munakata had to! Asahina was still trying to escape from the rocks holding her down.

It was Naegi who stopped him, however. The fact that he did lose Kirigiri and that he couldn't stop her on his own.

"Even though she fell to Despair, even though she died cursing my name," Naegi whispered, as the blood from his forehead dripped down his mouth. His voice raised as he shouted, "I'll never regret meeting her! I won't discard her memory to pretend the pain isn't there! That will never be Hope, Munakata!"

The nerves on Munakata's right cheek had been destroyed by Megadeth, so there was no pain when his tears touched the ruined flesh and bone. Even if there was, it would have been nothing compared to the pain inside.

He wondered when he had lost his way. When did he go from wanting a world of Hope to wanting a world where Despair was destroyed?

His obsession overrode everything else. The perfect way to face the blood-shed and pain without actually facing it. To do all the acts he'd been forced, and chose, to do without hesitating.

The Ocean threw the remaining pieces of rubble off Asahina and she rushed to Naegi's side, looking him over for injuries. She turned and positioned herself in front of Naegi, resembling a human wall more than anything else. Livin' On A Prayer was already healing his injuries.

"It's over. We've wasted enough time," She said, brooking no argument. "We need to find a way out of this place and stop Mitarai."

"It'll be hard. Mitarai has unlocked Requiem," Munakata's words made both of them gasp in shock. "It's a Stand like none other. It's beyond Holy Diver or Boulevard of Broken Dreams. I don't think even We Built This City could negate its power."

Naegi stared down at the floor and was clearly trying to stem his own tears. "Kirigiri was brainwashed, but not like the others. This was stronger. Stronger than any other brainwashing technique; if it somehow managed to warp the heart."

"Maybe we can get him from a distance?" Asahina asked.

"The cameras served as a channel for it to cross over from. I had to destroy the link to most of them to stop it from affecting me further. It twisted my soul, making me admire his drive and determination to wipe out Despair. The courage to move forward without fear." Munakata realised the rising admiration in his voice and stopped. It sent a chill up his spine and he briefly scolded himself for letting himself fall into the trap again. "We have to assume the worst in that whoever communicates with Mitarai is at risk of falling under that Stand's spell."

"So we have to somehow beat him without us actually even looking or hearing him?!" Asahina had just said what no one else wanted to admit out loud.
They would somehow have to do the impossible.

The sound of snapping fingers caught both Munakata and Asahina's attention, turning to see Naegi. "Wait! There is one way. There is someone whose Stand could allow them to approach Mitarai without being controlled by that Stand!"

"No." Munakata said. He knew what Naegi was thinking and couldn't have faith in such a plan. "How do we even know that the Remnants of Despair can be trusted? That he'll agree to leave his comrades behind? Or that they've survived the task-force I sent in while we were having the meeting."

Asahina's temper flared at those words.

"You what? Munakata, where do you get off-"

"That plan of yours wouldn't have worked. Not even if it was just Hinata alone." Naegi said, cutting Asahina off. Munakata didn't see anger or betrayal in his eyes, just total confidence in his words. "Don't Stop Me Now has the power to-"

Naegi stopped talking. Munakata heard it too.

The sounds of multiple footsteps marching straight towards their direction and not stopping. There must have been dozens of them all converging on their location. If this was a rescue attempt, they'd have come earlier. Far before the fourth round, especially if this was being broadcast over the world.

These were Mitarai's soldiers coming to take them prisoner.

"Attention survivors! By orders of the Ultimate Hope, you are to come with us and surrender your arms! Any refusal to comply will be met with by hostile force! We are prepared to level this building and sink it back into the depths of the sea!"

"If I use The Ocean, I might be able to get us away. Maybe break a wall and then swim to safety?" Asahina suggested, as Naegi shook his head.

"We can't leave the other survivors to drown. Plus, if we caused this place to sink, we'd lose..." Naegi's voice trailed off. He couldn't bring himself to say the word 'corpses'.

Munakata agreed with him. They had no choice but to let themselves be captured and try to get close to Mitarai. They couldn't win without murdering every last one of them, and who knows how many soldiers outside as well. The best thing to do would be to gather their numbers and strike then.

But that didn't meant he couldn't test a theory.

"How long has you been his dogs?! Do you know what he has done?" Munakata yelled out, as the footsteps drew closer, and the grunts above sounded like they were taking positions now.

Evidently, one of them was offended by his words. "The Ultimate Hope knows what he's doing! You're all just mad because Lord Dio outsmarted you fuckers."

"Lord Dio...Kirigiri never called him that." Naegi whispered.
Information would be vital for the battles ahead. The brainwashing apparently took place before the Final Killing Game. Maybe it was being broadcast across the world while they were all stuck in this wretched Killing Game. The override sequence that would have let Mitarai hijack world communications needed a cool-down period.

They still had time.

So this is a mission to martyr ourselves in. Munakata was prepared to die. He turned to the other two and said, "Asahina, the second you see his Stand, or a white light, you unleash everything The Ocean has to offer. I'll land the finishing blow."

"I wish we don't have to kill him," Naegi muttered despondently. Munakata almost said something when he was beaten to the punch. "But we might not have a choice, will we?" He asked. Munakata nodded.

Naturally, the soldiers aimed their rifles right at all three of them while cuffing them. Munakata silently noted that the brainwashing had affected their intelligence somewhat, if they didn't need try knocking them out. Killing In The Name was more than ready to eliminate them, if need be, but if they didn't even try...

As they were marched up to the surface, he could also hear the guards talking into the radio and confirming other captures. Some involved corpse retrieval (Naegi and Asahina wept when Kirigiri's body was confirmed found, Munakata said nothing about Sakakura) and others involved survivor pick-up. Andou and Kimura would soon be joining them.

He needed to have faith in Andou's ability to break free, and in her Stand's power to break Kimura from the brainwashing techniques. Her Sugar Sugar could easily turn the tide of battle, if they had to fight their way to the broadcast tower. If she finally had control over it, they had a winning chance.

Either way, Munakata refused to let Mitarai taint the world with his black hope.

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Mitarai chuckled darkly and leaned back in his chair. A king judging the fools who dared challenge his reign.

Behind him stood the five members of the Towa City Rescue Team, eyes blank beyond a white glow, and all of them stood at attention. Naegi saw them; from left to right stood the child Boingo, his friend from Hope's Peak Touko Fukawa, his little sister Komaru Naegi, the infamous mangaka Rohan Kishibe, and Oingo-Boingo's older brother- and all of them stood at attention.

Did Mitarai arrange this to break Naegi's spirit? To show him victims of his techniques and remind him that he could do nothing, just as he couldn't with Kirigiri? If he moved, he'd be killed. Mitarai knew this.

Was he always like this? Or was it Dio, or even his new Stand, that corrupted him?

"You see, Naegi? I've won. The world has embraced Hope, all other resistance has or will soon crumble, and even the Towa City Rescue Team has been saved." Mitarai said calmly. Speaking down to Naegi and the others as if they were stupid children. "Isn't it better to simply accept defeat
and reach Heaven with the rest of us? I'll put in a good word to Dio for you."

Naegi wanted to leap up from his chair and break the spell over the five of them. Livin' On A Prayer could break through Mitarai's brainwashing techniques, just as it did with Gozu. Anything to stop this nightmare!

Even if he wanted to, and managed to avoid the armed guards and Mitarai's 'Somebody To Love', he couldn't. He was tied by his waist to a chair just like Asahina, Munakata, Andou, and Kimura all were. The last of them wasn't in much shape to move, barely staying awake, and Andou was focusing on controlling Sugar Sugar. If she didn't, Mitarai said he would do it for her.

Not that there weren't shows of defiance. Asahina, even when gagged after refusing to stop screaming about Kirigiri's murder, was glaring daggers into Mitarai. They used metal chains instead of rope for Munakata. It wouldn't hold against Killing In The Name, but it didn't need to.

The true threat was Ryota Mitarai, sitting there with an expression and body language that suggested utter superiority.

Not for the first time today, Naegi thought back to Hope's Peak and how Dio cackled and laughed from above.

"Mitarai, what you're doing is wrong. This isn't hope. Hope doesn't come from manipulating people, it comes from people overcoming problems on their own, or with the help of those close to them."

Naegi said. He prayed he could try to sway Mitarai away from this path.

The Ultimate Animator simply shook his head and said, "Naegi, people don't have that kind of strength. You, Dio, Komaru, Kirigiri, all of you are the exceptions. Humans can't defeat despair. It's why we had war, famine, and suffering in the old world."

"What about The Tragedy?" Munakata hissed.

"The World's End was horrifying, but necessary to show just how bad things would become if humanity was allowed to drift. Haven't you ever wondered about what Dio's Heaven would look like?" Mitarai's voice turned higher and his eyes lit up. He wasn't looking at them anymore, but instead at whatever he imagined 'Heaven' would be like. "It'll be beautiful. No one will ever have to fear or have doubts about their future. No one will turn on one another out of paranoia or envy. People won't hurt each other accidentally through a lack of understanding. Isn't that what we all want?"

"I'm sure it sounds lovely in your head. It may have been paradise too, if it weren't for the fact that it would be Hell. A world ruled by a mad-man and a pitiful fool who-" Munakata couldn't finish his sentence, as one of the guards slammed the butt of their rifle against the back of his head.

"Munakata!" The only reply Naegi got was a slight moan and a hate-filled eye glaring at Mitarai, who seemed impatient himself.

"Naegi, Asahina, Andou, Kimura, and Munakata. I'm giving you all one final chance to simply admit that you've lost and that you will live in the new world." Mitarai said, leaning in towards them.

"There is no choice. Merely if you want to be your current selves, or if I will change your heart."

The Ultimate Luckster looked beyond Mitarai and towards the girl behind him. "Komaru! Please! You have to fight him!" He screamed, trying to find something in those eyes.
"Fine. Have it your way." Mitarai sighed and turned his head towards the group behind him. "Restrain them."

Komaru and the others stared down at Mitarai while Naegi began struggling against his restraints. The soldiers behind him and the others stepped back as Killing In The Name sliced through the chains, while Asahina's The Ocean was tearing her ropes apart. Andou was encouraging Kimura to do the same. Naegi was focused on only one person.

If the Towa City Rescue Team really were on Mitarai's side, then that was it. There was no hope left.

Komaru and her friends took a step forward and summoned their Stands.

"We refuse." Rohan said with a scornful look.

It was so close. All Naegi saw was an arm reaching out and yanking Mitarai to the left and off his seat. The sight of him almost collapsing out from his chair had easily destroyed what mystique of glory and dominance he had established.

Mitarai was still luck that that soldier helped him in time, because where he was sitting, there was now a pair of scissors that pierced straight through it. The wood splintered but that was it, which was good for everyone.

Because it meant Fukawa, or technically Genocider Syo, didn't break her promise not to kill anymore.

"GAHAHAHAHA! Did I fool youuuuuuu?" Syo leered at Mitarai, who was doing his best to crawl away. Naegi could hear Killing In The Name slicing the soldiers' weapons apart. Which made it safe for Syo to put her hands together as if she was a news-reporter on the scene. "Genocider Syo here! Guess what happens when you brainwash one personality, only for a certain manga-nerd to use his Stand to bring out Best Girl. You get Syo saving the day!"

Komaru rushed over and was already undoing his bonds. "Makoto, sorry about fooling you, but we have to! Rohan-sensei warned us about his anime and everyone was evacuating and we knew we had to reach you." Komaru's eyes lit up and Oingo took over getting the ropes off him, already done with Andou and Kimura. "Monaca gave us a ride, but before we could trap her, she flew off into space. Space! Did she do anything weird with that robot she built?"

Naegi said nothing. Komaru and the others did what they had to do and had no way of knowing what Monaca did, or had done, when they found her. The important thing was that they were together again. That Komaru wasn't one of Mitarai's slaves.

Rohan Kishibe- the Rohan Kishibe- was standing in front of Mitarai and had his pen at the ready. Both of them were looking at the other with pure loathing.

"Just try activating Somebody To Love. See if your Stand is quicker than my hands." Rohan went from angry to disappointed. "I thought you had potential, but in the end, you just became another-"

"Finish that sentence and I'll have you eating the dirt. I'd thank you for bringing me closer to Dio with your letter, but that'd be giving you too much credit." Mitarai growled. He shut his eyes and grinned, already knowing that Rohan was already starting to move away from him. "All I need to do is not look at your drawings. You have to avoid communicating with me in any way. Is that
something you really want to bet against?"

The second they saw the glimmer of white light burst forth, they had to retreat.

It wasn't just Rohan who ran. Oingo picked up his brother, as Syo and Komaru positioned themselves at his back to better protect the child, and dashed out of the tent. Naegi immediately followed with the other survivors of the Final Killing Game; Rohan leading the pack, the rest of the Rescue Team in the middle, Naegi, Andou, and Kimura behind them, and Asahina and Munakata protecting the rear.

As they left the tent, hundreds of eyes fell onto them and everyone around them put two and two together. Not fast enough for those in front of the small group to avoid getting hit by Rohan's Stand; which looked just like Pink Dark Boy. Their faces opened into pages and Rohan inscribed the same command into them as he did with others.

*I will not harm Rohan Kishibe, his allies, or Byakuya Togami and Yasuhiro Hagakure.*

Behind them, The Ocean summoned walls of water to block the hail of bullets while Killing In The Name swung his blade at such a high speed that it seemed closer to summoning blades than simply using one. The few bullets that made it past the water-shields, or didn't fly off-track, were sliced apart and fell to the ground.

But what happened now?

"What are you guys doing? We have to stop him!" Munakata snapped, as they travelled even further from the broadcast tower. Not for the first time, Naegi inwardly cursed how Mitarai set-up camp at the opposite end of the area. They were running further away from the Headquarters now!

Kimura heard Munakata's words and her eyes shot open. "No! We have to go back and submit! Lord Dio's world will-"

"Seiko, I told you to be quiet for a reason. Just stay by my side and wait until this battle is over, before we try surrendering." Andou said, softly but quickly. Sugar Sugar's dust shot into Kimura's open mouth and she became compliant again.

It wasn't right, but it was the only thing fighting against Mitarai's mind-control.

"No! You don't understand! That Stand's worse than you think. I don't know if he realises it yet, but he wasn't kidding when he said communicate in any way." Komaru pleaded. She looked up to Boingo, expecting him to elaborate.

Boingo nodded from his spot on Oingo's back, doing his best to avoid the gunfire. "I tried to use Thoth to find out the future and I ended up seeing that Stand of his! It was in my manga! Just when Oingo was taking a look as well, its light was shining out like an angel in the darkness! Just looking at it made my heart soar and it looked so magnetic! I felt like I was watching Komaru kick butt in Towa City again."

"That's the power of his Stand. The power of Somebody To Love. Its changes are seemingly permanent. If I used Heaven's Door, and communicated him in that way, he could easily take control of me before I could even do anything to him." Rohan turned his head towards Naegi and raised an eyebrow. He clearly an expected an answer from someone questioning the plan. "Where do we go from here?"
"The broadcast tower. We have to-"

Some of the soldiers had stopped moving and were looking down at their phones, or their communication visors were glowing white. It was obvious what they were watching. Mitarai must have still been panicked at what happened if it was only a few of them. It didn't change the fact that Somebody To Love was still corrupting their souls and solidifying his power over them.

"Oh no! He's using his Stand on them!" Komaru gasped.

"I can cut out their eyes and ears! It's technically not killing~" Syo sang her offer. Naegi was about to refuse, Komaru looking to do the same, when he sensed something.

He didn't know what it was. Maybe it was years of watching and being in battles that honed his instincts so much. Maybe it was just his Luck kicking in again.

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he was hearing the sound of what must have been an airplane.

It had to have been an airplane. What other kind of engine could fly up into the sky like that?

Naegi turned and stared at the source of the noise and realised just how wrong he was. That was definitely not an airplane, but instead the one thing that made his heart burst with hope.

There was Sonia Nevermind flying on the sky with each of her legs blasting a giant continuous burst of flame that carried her across the sky. Levitating behind her was Ballroom Blitz itself, the painted-on smiling face cackling while the red dress flapped around from the strength of the wind above.

Below was a large crowd of people fighting to follow her as she cried out, "Yes, come and follow the Queen of Novoselic; the Mistress of Despair! All who come near shall know glory, if they can lay a single finger on me!"

"What the hell is that?" Oingo screeched, upon seeing the sight of a flying Queen in the sky.

"So it seems they've chosen to side against Mitarai." Munakata muttered.

"What do we do?" Asahina asked, desperate to do anything but run.

Syo shot her hand up and Naegi- reluctantly playing along- pointed at her. She smiled, with her tongue still out. "Make sure my White Knight's safe." She said, as Naegi nodded.

"Right. Komaru, you and the others go and find and help Togami and Hagakure. Everyone else, we need to get to that broadcast tower!" He didn't even need to wait to finish. The Rescue Team were already running back towards the camp.

Naegi only had to look towards the shore to find a docked ship and the sounds of screams and battle-cries ahead. Tents were collapsing and people were rushing to the beach-side, only to then start retreating. He knew what it meant.

Class 77-B were here to save humanity.

They finally had a chance! There was finally a way to fight back! They wouldn't be stuck playing by Dio and Mitarai's rules any longer!
Dio would not win this day. Mitarai would not corrupt this world. Naegi wasn't going to let the deaths of everyone who had fought against Dio, or been victims of his ambition, be in vain!

They would fight, they would win, and they would finally end this story with the happy ending that mankind deserved!

Hope would find a way!

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Hajime Hinata smiled when he saw Makoto Naegi's back. It meant they arrived just in time.

"It looks like we arrived in time, huh, Naegi?" Hinata asked, not even trying to hide the triumph in his voice.

Naegi span around and couldn't hide his shock. Even after he saw Souda's designs for Sonia's...'rocket-legs'. "Hinata! When did you-"

"Just now. We were getting in a boat to avoid the assault force when we saw them turning around. Souda set us up with a radio and we heard what Mitarai was doing." Hinata explained.

Ryota Mitarai. The lost classmate of Class 77-B who had fallen to Dio long before anyone else had. His doubts and open heart were abused to create the vessel for Dio's sick plans, and were now being used to brainwash the entire world into submission. Hinata couldn't stop himself from feeling guilty about how far things had gotten.

If we had come sooner than we did, maybe we could have saved more people. Hinata stopped and reminded himself of the facts. And if we arrived later, the entire world would be doomed. There's no time for beating myself up.

Everyone knew the risks of coming here. Not only of failing, or some of them dying, but of what would happen after they succeeded. The fall of the Future Foundation would crush the hope of the world. There was also no way that humanity would forgive Class 77-B for what they had done.

They murdered their loved ones, they destroyed nations, and killed millions. All in the name of Dio Brando.

All they had left was each other. Weeks of sitting and waiting for each new person to wake up, hours of bloody surgery and using Don't Stop Me Now to accelerate the recovery, and the ongoing work to help one another get past the trauma. Right now, there were still wounds they were hiding away and not just physical.

If they couldn't find redemption, they could at least find peace.

We'll atone in finally ending this. Once and for all. Hinata walked up Naegi's side and stared at the battlefield.

"Anyone injured? I don't want to ask this, but who's dead?" He asked. People always died whenever Dio's work was involved.
"Togami and Hagakure are in one of the tents! I don't know which, but Komaru and the others said they knew where. As for the dead," Naegi visibly swallowed down his emotions and spoke quickly, but heavily. "Yukizome, Great Gozu, Bandai, Kizakura, Izayoi, Sakakura, and...Kirigiri."

Hinata put a hand on Naegi's shoulder and kept a tight grip on it. "Naegi, I'm sorry. None of this would have happened if you hadn't been made to defend your choice. Not a lot of people would have had faith in us."

The duo, or trio if you counted a certain someone waiting behind, stood out in a plain filled with uniformed men and women. The Future Foundation soldiers charged forward and aimed their rifles at both Hinata and Naegi, already moving to slowly surround them. Livin' On A Prayer had no chance of deflecting all those bullets.

"And we're gonna pay back that faith in full."

Don't Stop Me Now rushed past Hinata and raised its fists to strike. Time slowed down to a standstill as Hinata perceived the blows that the Stand was striking; most of them in the mid-section of the guards. The force and speed behind each punch was easily enough to shatter ribs and probably cripple those who wouldn't be killed by the impact. That, or the landing after flying away at that kind of speech would.

It was certain that they would be killed or injured for life.

That was why Hinata destroyed that certainty.

Instead, their futures would be one where some of them had broken ribs, arms, or legs, but wounds that would heal perfectly in time. They would be knocked out but without serious concussions. Most importantly, they would be freed from the brainwashing that had twisted their minds.

That didn't mean Naegi wasn't looking in horror at the small army that flew back dozens of metres back at the speed of sound. His face only regained colour when he saw Hinata's wry smile.

"Come on. You know me better than that." He said teasingly. Naegi knew all of Class 77-B better than that, after seeing them as their true selves.

Before, a single Remnant of Despair would have turned a battlefield into a complete massacre. Pain and suffering would greet you wherever you went as you became drenched in the rivers of blood.

Now? Now there was Sonia flying high in the sky as her Ballroom Blitz led whole crowds of people who were fighting and knocking each other out, then negating it when the battle became too bloody. Tanaka's Welcome To The Jungle saw him spewing skunk-spray over anyone who tried to get close to him, and then switching to a gorilla-like strength to get them unconscious. Souda was busy using a giant contraption that Hinata still wasn't sure on how it worked; just that it had a massive claw that grabbed people and let him use Welcome To The Machine on to have their limbs get so heavy that they were stuck on the ground.

Akane's Eye Of The Tiger allowed her to smash through the crowds and fight them with her enhanced strength. Between Nidai's You're The Best and Hanamura's Adam's Apply both enhancing her body and increasing calories, it was no wonder that there were piles of unconscious- but unbroken- bodies all around her. Not that Nidai and Hanamura were only relying on her; Nidai was matching her count and Hanamura's food was knocking out the idiots who tried it. Hinata made a
mental note to thank Hanamura for agreeing to poison his food again; he knew what that meant to him after learning what he did as Despair.

From the corner of his eye, Hinata could see a forest of blades spouting from the ground and filling the landscape. There were no bodies draped on it, although the blood did shine bright. Pekoyama must have been trying hard to avoid hitting any vital areas; even leaving herself open at times. Maybe that was why, before reaching Naegi, he saw Kuzuryuu's Beat It transferring some of her wounds over to him, after having beaten some of the guards who got a bit close with knives.

Tsumiki was busy in the medical tents. She somehow had a scent for injured people and her Voodoo would be more than enough to heal both Togami and Hagakure. It wasn't just a Stand that could hurt, after all. Saijonji and Ibuki were enjoying a little concert of their own, Safety Dance leading the troops over to Ibuki who would take them out with Feel The Noize. Their ear-drums would be aching tomorrow, but they wouldn't be deafened any time soon. Those that were left weren't able to look away in time from Koizumi's Into The Lens; but this time, she wasn't trying to kill them. Simply put them in a safe place until all this was over with.

Sagishi was staying back. If Naegi turned his head around, he'd find the Ultimate Imposter lurking in the shadows and refusing to meet his eye. He'd been in that state ever since he learned what Mitarai was doing.

He feels responsible for this. Way too much. Hinata knew what Sagishi thought he should have done; somehow put an end to the friendship between Dio and Mitarai. Or even say that he didn't trust Dio at all. Or maybe even admit the truth. As if that'd have no chance of backfiring. I don't know how he could have done it. At least he might have tried, instead of me. All I wanted back when I was Izuru was to see how far Dio could go. If he'd free me from boredom. Then I just decided there was no point in fighting.

Hinata knew Sagishi wouldn't give up, that's why he was here. Don't Stop Me Now would keep Mitarai's Stand from messing with his mind and give Sagishi the chance to talk with Mitarai. To have him see that there was another way; he wasn't bound to Dio and he had other friends just waiting for him.

The two were about to head towards the broadcast tower when Naegi stopped them.

"Hinata, wait, you need to know something," Naegi said desperately. His voice shook as he continued. "Mitarai's Stand...it's not Virtual Insanity anymore. He's like you. His Stand's called Somebody To Love and it doesn't just brainwash you. It completely changes your soul and makes you loyal to him; it's how he got Kirigiri and he's going to-"

"We won't let him." Hinata turned to Sagishi who sighed.

"Mitarai may be committing evil, but he does not come from a place of evil. I think you know that by now. Dio had been corrupting him for years, making him think that Dio's dream was his own and that their friendship was all he had and needed. It's less Hope and more a mixture of guilt and grief driving him on. The idea that too much has happened- that he has done too much- for him to turn back, so he might as well see it through." Sagishi pleadingly looked at Naegi, as if begging permission, as he said, "It may sound overly idealist, but I still believe in him. Just give me a chance and-"

"If you can talk him down, I'm willing to give it a try. Just be careful, Dio's head was on a lot of the broadcasts in that Killing Game. Maybe the whole thing was animation, or maybe he just animated
the mouth, but you never know with someone like him." Naegi replied. Sagishi's whole body relaxed, as if a great weight had been lifted.

He needed to trust himself more.

Light foot-steps drew closer and a familiar light voice from behind said, "Ah, to think that you're thinking of us even now." Komaeda couldn't hide the admiration in his voice, although it was croakier than normal. It didn't stop him from spinning Naegi around and gripping his wrist tight. "My underclassman is really amazing. His Luck is stronger than mine and he's the Ultimate Hope. We really were lucky to have someone like you protecting us, back in those dark days."

Nagito Komaeda was pale. Paler than usual; barely managing to stand on his own two legs as his body weight kept him down. His hoodie and shirt draped off him like a hospital gown two sizes too large, and his belt had to have more holes put in it to keep his trouser up. His sunken face still lit up with joy at the sight of Naegi, probably leaving the ship to meet him with, despite what Tsumiki said.

_I told you to wait until-_ Hinata wondered if Komaeda was being defiant, or if his mind had truly regressed that far already. _Don't Stop Me Now...I guess even Requiem has limits._

"Naegi, is there anywhere you need us to be?" He asked, hoping that reminding Komaeda of the mission would draw him away.

"Try and lessen the pressure on everyone else. We can do that while heading to the broadcast tower and then try to stop Mitarai."

"No. Naegi, we can't risk you, especially if Mitarai- or even Dio-have a trick up their sleeve. Us three are more than equipped for this," Hinata said.

Komaeda made a confused noise. "We're off to stop Mitarai from coating the world with false hope, right?"

"Yes, Komaeda. We're going to try and reason with him and make him realise that there's another way. That he doesn't have to go down the road to hell because there's nothing left. If that doesn't work," Hinata looked to Sagishi. "We're hoping it doesn't come to force."

Hinata wanted to re-unite Class 77-B and that included Mitarai. Nanami probably only knew him for a few moments on that god-forsaken day, but she still would have wanted it. She would have wanted to save every single person who had been a victim of Dio.

Naegi nodded. The four of them walked towards the broadcast tower. Komaeda was having to lean on Sagishi to stay upright and began muttering to himself in a low voice. Sagishi looked like he wanted Komaeda anywhere but close to him, still upset about what happened in the Neo-World Program.

The four of them together would be more than enough to take out anyone in their way. Not that they'd have to. The only Stand users on Mitarai's side were the former Warriors of Hope, and it looked like Naegi's sister and her friends had that handled.

"I wonder what Monaca's doing?" Komaeda asked. Hinata didn't like the way that the question made Naegi flinch. Not for the first time, he wished Komaeda hadn't declined as far as he had done so now. The Luckster ignored everything else as he sighed. "That girl, so easily bored. She thinks space is a good place, but what is a place without hope or despair? She'll either stop thinking, or be forced
to come down to earth and face her sins."

Komaeda had said that about her before when it was his turn to explain what he had done. He spoke all about how he tried to create a new Dio and failed; that Monaca only cared about Dio instead of Hope and Despair. He said those exact words.

He said it three times while on the ship.

Hinata would cross that bridge when he got to it, however. Komaeda's health was important, but the priority was saving the world from Mitarai and saving Mitarai from Dio's influence. They couldn't fix most of the damage they caused, no matter how many scars they removed or hid, but they could do something now.

They could still save the world they ruined.

---

**Why is this happening? Why?!**

Mitarai had to steady his breathing. In and out. In and out. He needed to keep a cool head. He had to ignore the wind slamming against his face as he ascended the steps.

No one was following him and, even if they did, he had Somebody To Love protecting him now. The Stand was now going to be active all the time. It was what gave him the peace of mind necessary to go through these trials.

Especially with what just happened.

"Izuru Kamukura, why are you doing this now? If you waited just another hour...no, just another minute!" Mitarai muttered to himself.

Mitarai spent weeks planning to climb these stairs in a rush, if it had been needed, but training and actually doing it were two different things. He'd also been running around for hours now with only chemically-induced rest. It was the only sleep he had all week.

Dio could have cleared these stairs with ten times the injuries Mitarai had on him- Kirigiri's arm-lock and knee still stinging. Mitarai could at least make the climb quickly! He had the ultimate Stand as well. Fate was clearly on their side.

Yes, his classmates did arrive to help, but that was probably a sense of obligation to Naegi. A reaction to the seemingly meaningless horrors they committed. Once Mitarai spread Somebody To Love across the entire world, then they'd see the futility in resisting. They'd listen when he told them that he could help them erase the sins they were made to commit against their will. Then he would triumph.

Victory was still within his grasp.

*But what if they know where he is? I wanted him to be safe from all this.* Mitarai put Dio in a safe place after he had almost been completely destroyed by We Built This City. His spirit needed a place to rest and heal, but so much time had passed and nothing changed. There was a chance that Dio
would need to escape. *If it comes to it, I'll offer my own body.*

Dio had refused when Mitarai first offered, just after the plan in Towa City had failed. Pet Shop translated for Dio and explained, using morse-code, that Dio’s soul risked losing itself if it possessed someone with too strong a will. In his state, it'd have to be someone willing but also far weaker.

The choice of Komaru had been to torment Naegi, rather than using Mitarai or one of the Warriors of Hope. Now it came from fear that it would destroy his soul.

Mitarai had finally gathered the remaining Stand Arrows again. He had made the Rescue Team hand Rohan's over to show loyalty, only it was a trick! His only regret now was that he didn't use Somebody To Love on them the second he saw them and none of this would have happened. He still had their Arrow, now included with his own and the one he recovered from Monaca's fortress a while back. The last had been stored with Dio, where it would have been safe.

The Stand Arrows were his! Everything had been going broadly to plan! Why was this being so hard? Was he being punished?

Wasn't Dio supposed to be bringing about Heaven by now? Couldn't he have given me the information on how to reach it? Mitarai felt doubt in his heart for the first time ever since-No! He couldn't be that weakling again! Mitarai violently shook his head to expel the thoughts. No! This is the right thing to do. I've been doubtful for too long! Fate gave me Somebody To Love because it knew I was right. That was why I didn't brainwash Dio all those years ago; because I knew it was for a better world! No matter how much it hurt.

If he gave up now, all the sacrifices made by everyone to reach this point would have been for nothing. What would Nanami, Yukizome, Gozu, Izayoi, Kirigiri, and so many others have died for? Nothing?! All of this suffering and pain just for a damaged status quo?!

There would be no turning back.

Mitarai was already half way there when he pulled out his hand-held radio and pressed the side-button. "Lieutenant! Report. Are the Remnants of Despair killing their enemies?"

"No, sir! They're knocking them out. More than a few broken bones, but it's like they're trying to do the opposite. I've fought the Remnants for years and never seen anything like it. Nevermind keeps turning Ballroom Blitz off before anyone touches her, Mioda's making people disoriented but not deafening them, and Kuzuryuu's got wounds! He even took some from Pekoyama."

"It's a trick. They've lost whatever loyalties they've had and are trying to stop the world from knowing hope. Keep resisting with all you have!" He commanded. They had to be delayed for as long as possible.

"Yes, sir. We won't fail the Ultimate Hope now." The Lieutenant replied.

*And the Ultimate Hope won't fail you.* Mitarai had to keep moving forward. He couldn't look back. Not even for a second!

He couldn't risk tripping or letting his heart feel doubt again! All he had to do was send out another transmission and have Somebody To Love reach everyone who watched it. The only down-side was that it'd have a smaller audience than The Eyes of Heaven, but that wouldn't be a problem.
Potency would make up for it.

Mitarai kept moving at a steady pace as he said to himself, "I'll be broadcasting to millions. They'll spread it to everyone else, and that'll be it. Izuru, you think Don't Stop Me Now can stand a chance against Somebody To Love? Well, guess again. My will is just as strong as yours and it's been forged by years of waiting and planning. The will to make something good come out from The World's End! I won't let all this pain and suffering be for nothing!"

He just had to make it in time. Maybe give some orders to send in more troops and swamp the rest of Class 77-B whole. It wouldn't be enough to kill them, but it'd force a retreat.

Whether they would submit after seeing the world under Somebody To Love, or when Dio returned and reached Heaven, it didn't matter. So long as they surrendered and this bloody story would end.

_I just have to keep moving forward. Never looking back. If I look back, everything will be lost._

Mitarai thought to himself. As he kept on moving, despite his legs aching and a stitch on his side, he repeated Dio’s words in his mind, _I'm right, because I know I am right. Humanity can never defeat Despair on its own, no matter what Naegi thinks. I can do more than simply spread misery. I will make a better world._

Mitarai couldn't fail now! Not after he was so close to fulfilling the dream he and Dio shared. The very symbol of their bond and all they had gone through together!

He wouldn't fail. He'd die first!

---

Ruruka Andou was currently being protected by her (Former? They hadn't been close for years and it wasn't like she'd ever forgive Ruruka for today) friend and dozens of soldiers. Most of them had turned off their communication devices so there was no chance of them being corrupted by Somebody To Love.

If she didn't need them for protection, she'd have had them all smack each other on the head really hard. Apparently that worked for some of the soldiers being knocked out by the Remnants of Despair. Those that had their comms destroyed before Mitarai used his Stand Requiem.

She used Sugar Sugar to lure her rising crowd of supporters, although the recruitment had plateaued after Mitarai's Requiem enhanced his control, closer to the HQ entrance. If the other soldiers thought they were just guarding the entrance, then they'd go away. It'd keep them away and make sure Ruruka and Seiko were safe.

Not that she didn't trust the Ultimate Pharmacist to take care of herself. It was more that she didn't trust her to not attack the Remnants.

Apparently, Makoto Naegi actually managed to cure them...or this was all an elaborate ruse and they were doomed.

Ruruka was choosing to be positive, for once.

Speaking of the devil, she saw Naegi running towards the battlefield instead of towards the entrance.
Right after Ruruka had secured it for their side! Knowing the air-head, he probably wanted to heal his friends or actually fight. With his Stand too! The kid clearly needed some help.

"Naegi!" Ruruka shouted, cupping her hands in an attempt to sound louder. "I don't know what it is you're planning, or if the Remnants of Despair are just doing what they feel, but you're our only hope! Dio can't win!"

"What about you, Andou?" He asked, not even noticing the small group slowly moving behind him.

"Don't worry about me," She smirked and threw out a hand. "Sugar Sugar's not going to let anyone touch me."

The giant pink version of her head shot forward and gushed out plumes of multi-coloured smoke from its ear-holes that flooded the ground around Naegi and went straight into the orifices of those Future Foundation soldiers. Ruruka gritted her teeth and concentrated to keep the cloud from rising above Naegi's knees and having the scent avoid his mouth and nose. It was all focused on those people trying to get him.

A few of her followers broke off and tried to fight the new arrivals, but the job was done for them. The attackers that didn't fall for Sugar Sugar's spell instead fell for the lack of open air they could breathe. A handful had even rushed over to her side, talking about how sorry they were and wanting her forgiveness.

She turned back to Naegi, who was giving her a slight look of disapproval. "Some of them are infected with Somebody To Love, but not everybody! That includes Seiko. When this is over, we can cure them, but until then, we have to keep fighting." She replied, defending herself.

It was clear that the morality of her tactics wasn't his only problem with her plan.

"Is Sugar Sugar a combat Stand? I can't let you stay out in this battlefield and-"

"You let your little sister and her friends fight the Warriors of Hope, you let your friend get the corpses somewhere safe, and you're telling me that I should just sit alone and wait to die?!" Ruruka asked. The time had come for her to drop the sweetness and get sour.

"N-N-No, I-"

"Why are you being so cruel to a girl like me?"

"I-"

"Do you blame me for what happened earlier?"

"No, I-"

"S-S-So," Ruruka sniffled. "You just think I'm a dummy trying to get herself killed?"

"That's not-I-Please don't cr-You-Okay! Yep. You go and secure this area, Andou." Naegi commanded with a blush. He ran towards the Future Foundation building.

Ruruka smirked to herself and decided to move onto the next phase of her plan. Simply lying in wait for someone else to solve this crisis wasn't for her. She and her 'friends' were going to join the battle
and they were going to make sure that this story had the proper ending.

She posed her body so that her front was slightly tilted to the right, her legs were slightly crouched, and her right arm was right at the centre, positioned so that the palm was facing the sky. Her left hand searched her pockets and found her last few macaroons and plucked them out. With a spin of her fingers, the sweets rolled down her arm and used the momentum to continue moving from her collarbone and to the downward-leaning right arm. There were three macaroons and each one landed right between her fingers, apart from between the thumb and index.

"Yoi-chan, I know you're with me." Ruruka whispered. With his soul besides her, she shot her right arm forward and- while still holding the macaroons- pointed it towards the ongoing battle. "Okay, everyone! Let's stop these evil people from trying to hurt me and my friends! Remember to knock them out only! This is the true will of Dio and Mitarai. You trust me, don't you?"

They replied with a loud cry of support.

"Then fight! Fight for the future. Fight for hope. Fight for love and delicious sweets!"

"For love and delicious sweets!"

Ruruka's army ran ahead and slammed against the lines of the other forces. The Remnants' entry had caused some of the soldiers to abandon their rifles in panic and others were simply wasting bullets. They had no idea that their friends would turn on them, believing that they were the traitors to Dio's sick plan.

As she slowly advanced, Sugar Sugar's clouds of sugary smoke were directed to have everyone know the taste of its dust. It didn't matter if it was Future Foundation or the Remnants, the point was to fight and stop whoever was trying to fight against Ruruka. It still took more effort than it should have for Ruruka to keep it from getting out of control.

But she kept it. She was in control of her Stand, at last. She could count Naegi's distant steps as a small victory.

I know it'll never be enough. Not after what I did to you. Yoi-chan, Seiko, Ruruka closed eyes and let herself think in the self-imposed darkness. If I just try. If I just try to save this world and keep it from becoming nothing more than a kingdom of a madman and his enabler...it'd be a start, right?

Ruruka didn't know. There wasn't any way to be certain about what she was doing.

That was why she needed to have faith. Unconditional faith that this was at least a start. Ruruka briefly wondered what might happen if Seiko awoke and realised what she did. She'd probably hate her forever when the brainwashing ended.

Fine. That was a price worth paying. So long as it meant that the world would go back to how it should be.

That was why Ruruka was still fighting, even when the odds only just seemed equal, and she had no idea what would happen.

A chance at freedom was better than a certainty of eternal slavery any day.
"Sakakura?!” Naegi cried out, shocked that Juzo was still alive. The look on his face—like he was about to piss himself—made the Ultimate Boxer laugh to himself.

"Yeah...it's me...look like shit, don't I?” He gave a little smile. Just waiting for what the shit was going to say. "Probably glad, aren't you? Big bad bully got what's coming to him. Or are you too busy doing your best impression of the Buddha?"

The soldiers who found him certainly thought he was dead. They loaded his burnt, torn-apart body onto a stretcher and didn't even try asking about the haphazard stitching on some of the cuts. They didn't even check to see if he was still breathing. Just thought he crawled to a medical room and died pitifully.

Rule one of a fight. Don't forget that you're in a fight.

Those guys were too busy kissing Mitarai's ass to realise that Juzo was still breathing. Not that they could have stopped Knock You Out from punching them in the backs and knocking them out. Still, it was nice to get a rest and not get dropped on his ass.

Juzo would need all the energy he could get now. He stood at the bottom of the broadcast tower and swore under his breathe. If he wasn't bleeding out, he might have tried his luck with the stairs and the dozens of armed guards inside.

**Knock You Out could do it, but I wouldn't last climbing those stairs. Tch, like climbing the wall's any better.** Juzo gritted his teeth and began walking towards the wall of the building.

Naegi, naturally, had to step in and act all concerned. "You're hurt! You need to-"

"Get medical attention? Not happening, not in this battle. These wounds aren't the kind of things you get back from. Besides, you're gonna heal me?” Juzo asked, giving Naegi a look that said he didn't buy it.

Maybe facing death was making him sentimental, or it was knowing that Munakata thought he was a traitor and would finish the job, if he ever saw him again, but something made Juzo reconsider his words.

The 'Ultimate Hope' looked sad. Heart-broken even. Seeing someone so willing to let themselves dies and unable to do anything. Maybe he finally seen some shit in the Final Killing Game, or whatever Mitarai called it to help himself sleep at night.

Juzo decided that, if he was going to die, he was going to get shit off his chest.

"You know why I hated you?” He glared as Naegi looked shocked all of a sudden. As if this hadn't been mostly personal. "Some tiny naive punk who spent most of his time licking Dio's boots when they were together because that was the kind of guy he was. Some short punk who acted like he was hot shit because he could stand up with a few broken bones and make a pretty speech."

He thought back to the worst day of his life, even today only coming a close second. Dio utterly humiliating him, having him betray his best friend, and making him feel worthless. All those days where Juzo saw the chaos of the world and cursed himself for being weak.
Then seeing Makoto Naegi lead his friends and defeating Dio. Seeing the moment he dreamed of, but in the hands of someone not him.

Just looking at Naegi after that pissed him off.

Being jealous of someone like that kid made Juzo laugh at himself, as he said, "You managed to be the one to stop Dio, while I could only punch the walls until my fists started to bleed. Well, fuck it. This time, I'm gonna be the hero. All I gotta do is knock out the transmission, right?"

Naegi nodded, but seemed unsure. He probably didn't want Juzo dying on his watch. Juzo felt a warm light around him and some of the weaker burns from Heat Of The Moment began fading away, as did some of the more shallow cuts from Killing In The Name. It wasn't going to save him, but it lessened the pain.

It was funny. Even after all this, Naegi was trying to help Juzo out.

"Heh, who'd have thought I'd have hope, after all this time?" Juzo asked, laughing at himself, like the cosmic joke he was. "After what Munakata did to me." He whispered under his breath.

Not enough, since Naegi suddenly said, "You have to understand! It was Tengan! He tricked Munakata into thinking-"

"I don't care," Juzo snapped, not entirely lying. He had enough trickery and lies and deceit in his life! Now was the time for open truth. "I don't care if he thinks I'm his best friend, or if he wants me dead. I should hate him for what he did. A part of me does. But another part? Another part of me still loves him. Loves him enough to help him end this goddamn nightmare and put an end to all this." He turned to look Naegi straight in the eye and scream the next words out. "That's why I'm doing this. That's why, even when it kills me, even after what he did to me, I'm taking that tower down and I'm saving him!"

There was a soft chuckle in the air behind him.

"If you putting aside something like that, how could I hold a grudge about a fight?" Juzo recognised that voice. He turned around to see green and red eyes twinkling with delight when he saw it.

'It' being the humanoid, glass-shaped thing that had skin shining like a blue sky that punched him in the gut. It was too fast for him to react! Juzo stood there waiting for the pain to come around.

What he felt instead was energy burning in his gut. The kind of drive that made him run whole marathons when he was training and wanted to just stop.

The pride when Munakata told him that he had saved his life, back when every day was a question of whether they'd die now or later.

"It only works so long as you believe. Believe that your future, limited as it is, will turn out how you wish it." Izuru-no, Hajime Hinata walked forward and smirked at Juzo."If it hurts, consider it payback for you being a douche-bag all those years ago."

Juzo growled at the little shit and stalked his way back towards the broadcast tower. He looked up at the thing and breathed in and out. This was going to be a trial of endurance, getting up there fast enough to stop that broadcast from going on. The only reason that the idiots outside were actually
fighting the Remnants.

He could hear Naegi whispering concerns to Hinata, who was still dragging him off. The guy who stood up to Dio's AI and apparently stopped him from possessing ten bodies to ruin the world with. Right after he had decided to help Dio in the first place.

And he was going to smirk at him?!

_Goddamn punks. Think they can outshine me?!_ Juzo let the indignation fuel his Stand. Knock You Out crouched and held its hands together as if to form a spring-pad. He put his foot on it and let the Stand throw him into the sky, flying right behind him as it threw two punches to create holes for Juzo to grab on. A perfect catch and he was hanging from the building. _I'm the World Heavyweight Champion! Undefeated, bitch!_

Dio was going to ruin the lives and dreams of Juzo and everyone he cared about? Fine.

But Juzo was going to get revenge! He was going to take Dio's dreams of godhood and domination and throw them down the shitter! When people spoke of how this war ended, they were going to talk about how Juzo-fucking-Sakakura beat the shit out of his bitch Friend and saved the world from being brainwashed.

Juzo's rage, sadness, and all-around negativity had kept him down for so long, but now it was the fuel that was pushing him up. Making him reach higher for that next grip.

It was going to kill him, but he was going to finally take revenge!

He'd be the one to destroy Dio's legacy once and for all!

_Koichi Kizakura/Heat Of The Moment: Dead_
Don't Stop Believin'

Chapter Notes

Well, this is the final chapter of the main story. We've got an IF chapter, Bonus Features, an Alternate Ending, and then I really need to focus on exams. After, I may do a few Special Chapters such as DR:IF's version of Hope's Blood, or a sequel for BabyGiorno, but for now, this is the end of the story of Dio Brando as the main villain of Danganronpa.

Act 5: Hope's Blood
Chapter Twenty-One: Don't Stop Believin'

"Dio...today's the day."

"..."

"I don't know why I don't just brainwash them with Virtual Insanity. It'd be so easy. Just make them see the right patterns and I could make them do anything I want. I could have Munakata renounce Hope, make Andou and Kimura bark like dogs, have Gozu choke the life out of anyone near him, and I could even make Naegi kill himself horribly. The power to control the human mind, it's the kind of power that can destroy worlds."

"..."

"Maybe that's why you did what you did. You didn't want to rely on that kind of power. It's such a lazy way to win, simply taking control of your opponents. You wanted to show that you were the Ultimate Master because of your own two hands and your own efforts. Maybe it's the same with me. I want this Final Killing Game to reflect our plan for the world. Show them horrific Despair and then save them with Hope."

"..."

"Or maybe there's a part of me that hates them and wants them to suffer. Something harsh like you could be. But maybe I'm just weak. I'm some sick freak who wants to break them slowly and have them beg me to save them. Or I want to feel like the hero, instead of my usual pathetic weak self."

"..."

"Dio, I won't let you down. For so long, I simply sat back and let you and others do the heavy-lifting while I simply hid away and felt bad for myself. I promise you, that won't be the case now. I will bring about our dream and you will have a body again. You can show me how to reach Heaven and I'll watch you ascend. We can still save this world and bring an end to despair!"
"..."

"Whatever happens, I'm glad I met you. Pet Shop, we should get going. We're already late enough as it is."

"..."

"Goodbye, Dio. I hope we'll meet again."

---

Mitarai stood in front of the broadcast station as if he was a human-shield. He didn't dare get close to pressing the button to send out the broadcast again, unless he wanted Izuru Kamukura to jump at him with Don't Stop Me Now. It was the same reason he kept himself from using Somebody To Love; for fear that the certainty of its brainwashing would be cancelled out.

He couldn't allow a Stand like that anywhere near Dio. Not when he was so close to bringing him back. Not when he was so close to ending this nightmare.

That was why he wouldn't let them cross the bridge to the control centre. Not Kamukura and not even Sagishi!

"I'm sick of pain and sadness!" He screamed. He did his best to ignore the way his whole body shook under Kamukura and Sagishi's stares. "Someone strong like you could never understand. That's why I have to use Somebody To Love. To ensure that the eradication of despair is permanent. So Dio can finally reach Heaven!"

"What kind of a world would that be? A world where no one feels pain or sadness at the suffering of those close to them? That's not a world without despair; that's a world without consequences or meaning." Kamukura took a step forward and said, "Mitarai, think of the man Dio was. Not the man you wanted him to be. Is his heaven really a world of hope? At best, it would be a world without regrets, not a world without sin."

Mitarai didn't say anything. Was a world without regret so terrible a thing? There was no point to having regret, if no one ever did things they would come to regret.

Everyone would be at peace.

(Except for him.)

He gripped his arms with his hands and whispered, "A world without regrets? Is that what you think? Even if I created paradise, I would have regrets." There was as little control over his voice as there was over his emotions; Mitarai was now screaming at the top of his voice. "I was the one who showed Dio this path! Without me, he'd have never discovered my techniques, Stands, or even thought about anything more than personal enrichment! With me, he found a way to achieve happiness. He-We were the ones who were going to destroy this world and make a new one. He couldn't have done it without me! All my work...it caused this! I'm the reason for The World's End!"

"No. That's what Dio wanted you to believe. If you felt as if all his sins were yours, you would not leave his side." Sagishi said soothingly. He took a step forward too.
"You don't know that!" Mitarai howled. "I...people are still dying." He couldn't even look at them, staring down at the ground, while Somebody To Love remained inactive. There was no need to scare the two-three including the walking corpse behind them- into action. "They're dying because of me. If I don't create a world of hope, then what was it for?"

"I wish I could tell you that all this pain and suffering had meaning, but it didn't. All of this happened because of Dio's ambition. His thirst and hunger for power. There was no grand ideal beyond that."

Sagishi replied.

"So come with us," Kamukura extended a hand, even when he was only halfway across the narrow bridge. "If you feel that your sins can never be atoned for, then join us. You've caused a lot of suffering. That can't be changed, but so have we. Come with us to Jabberwock Island and live a life of peace, or to help atone for your sins."

A soft smile came to Sagishi's face and he extended a hand too. "You don't have to do this. There's always a path back. All it needs is for you to know that you're doing wrong and that you can and will stop." He said, as Mitarai sniffed.

"Why? If it wasn't for me, you'd have lived your happy school lives. You wouldn't have become monsters and slaves ordered to break the world. People like Gozu, Yukizome, Izayoi, Tengan, and Kirigiri..." Mitarai knew how pathetic he must have looked. He was crying like a stupid little kid. "Dio said it was for the hope of the world. That people wouldn't have accepted it otherwise. They needed to see that Dio was the only way out."

"The only thing Dio did for hope was become the Ultimate Despair. Makoto Naegi became the Ultimate Hope by vanquishing him and that's that. There's no worse despair than realising that you've been fighting for it, when you were intending to make hope. Funny, isn't it?" Komaeda said, gasping out the words as if he was being choked. It was the first thing he said, slowly trailing behind his friends.

Kamukura and Sagishi looked like they were resisting the urge to say something to Komaeda. They wouldn't dare look back and risk Mitarai activating the broadcast and infusing it with Somebody To Love. All they could do was let their eyes twitch and keep their focus on him.

Sagishi was the first to say something again, his eyes filled with anticipation as he met Mitarai's stare.

"Mitarai, I can't make you change your mind. Maybe if I did something sooner, or realised that your friendship wasn't just uncomfortable but toxic...another regret I'll have for the rest of my life. What I can do is say that it's not too late to stop this. You've always had a home with us and you still do now." He said.

"Let us help you, Mitarai. Leave the corpses of the past behind and be with us," Kamukura asked. Both he and Sagishi were treating Mitarai like a wounded animal more than a threat, speaking softly and offering a place to stay.

But only if he got out of the way and let them put an end to all this.

Mitarai could risk it. He could activate Somebody To Love, pray that his will was stronger than the others to control them, and then send out the broadcast again with the Stand Requiem infused within it. The entire world would be captured and there would be no point to their resistance. Mitarai would win and they'd fall into nihilism; all while Dio was returned and would heal them and the world with
Heaven.

What if Don't Stop Me Now overcame Mitarai's will? Maybe it'd somehow stop the broadcast, or Somebody To Love itself, and then he'd be helpless to stop the destruction of his work. It'd be so easy to send out a different message, or send a different set of brainwashing techniques to negate his own. There were other broadcast stations in the building, although much smaller, that might have gotten the job done.

Why hadn't Mitarai destroyed them?

It'd have been so easy. Just like simply brainwashing the Future Foundation.

Mitarai had told himself hundreds of times that he was right because he knew he was right. That this was the only way for him to save the world and cure it of Despair. The Tragedy was inevitable, but the destruction and pain could now be healed in a single day. That was the truth, wasn't it?

This was the right thing to do. He could finally redeem himself, right?

Mitarai would only need to turn his head to find Dio. No one would ever think to search the Future Foundation broadcast tower for the head of Dio Brando. No one had ever thought that a Branch Head could have turned to his cause, let alone three.

The jar itself held the decaying head of Mitarai's friend.

The years hadn't been kind to him; his hair had to be taken out after it started to shed and messed with the fluids, the flesh along the upper half of his neck was rotting very slowly, and the skin was no longer sharp and dignified but pruned and fragile. Mitarai's finger had once accidentally touched the left cheek and a thin long strip of skin came off with it. You could see the thick red line along it.

He looked so weak and fragile. He'd once been the Ultimate Master and was now in that pitiful state.

Not that his spirit was any better. It took minutes for Pet Shop to relay a handful of sentences using the ouija board.

Would it even be worth bringing him back?

"A life where, even if not forgiven, I can live at peace with myself, or even on the road to it." Mitarai laughed to himself. It was empty and cold, just like the world he created. "It almost sounds too good to be true."

Mitarai thought back to when he first met Dio. He was all anger, hatred, and mockery, threatening to slice off Mitarai's fingers for seemingly no reason. That temper was a constant part of him as was his ability to do the cruellest things. The way that he simply unleashed The World's End as if it was nothing to him.

But he was also so quiet and polite to Mitarai. He'd been there for him in his darkest moments and was a testament to the power of his techniques. If he could manage to enlighten Dio about Heaven, if through murky visions, then maybe he'd be able to save the world itself.

It had been years since they actually spoke with one another. Years since they ever touched. Was that really worth all this?
Maybe Mitarai could find his own Hope, instead of trying to save a world he helped kill.

Yes. He did help bring suffering and pain to billions of people. He did it because Dio vowed to never betray him so long as he never betrayed Dio. The multitude of sins they committed together could never mean a normal and peaceful life. Not so long as he simply allowed the cycle of hope and despair to resume again. Mitarai finally had the power of Somebody To Love to bring about Heaven.

Dio...Dio never betrayed him, so he would never betray Dio.

A life where he would live at peace with himself did seem too good to be true.

Not after what he did. He had to make it right, no matter the cost.

"Because it is." Mitarai whispered to himself. He turned back and sadly smiled at the three who came all this way for him. "Hinata, I'm sorry for not calling you by your name earlier. Sagishi, Komaeda, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am that Dio made you do the things you did as Despair." The thought of the new world pushed him on and he felt the regret fade away. Maybe he could convince them to let him do this! If he just explained it properly! "But that'll soon change. Pet Shop relayed Dio's message! His Stand when he reaches Heaven, it'll be far stronger than Holy Diver. He'll bring back everyone who died, and he can overwrite reality! It'll be like none of us ever did or suffered those awful things. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that Hope?"

Mitarai felt confidence return to him. Peace of mind was restored and the smile on his face was genuine. The downcast and grieving look on Hinata and Sagishi's faces wouldn't last long once Mitarai was done here. They'd be just as full of hope as he was.

The only thing that Mitarai didn't expect, however, was the look of utter joy and fulfilment on Komaeda's face.

"That's brilliant!" Komaeda shoved his way past Hinata and Sagishi and marched over to Mitarai. The animator was afraid of what he'd do, until Komaeda continued speaking. "To think that you were the Hope born from the Despair of Dio Brando! You even passed the test! You stayed true to Hope despite the temptations and now everyone in the world will know only that. Despair will be destroyed forever!"

Hinata looked like he had just been struck. "Komaeda?! What are you-"

"A Reserve Course student who got blessed with gifts beyond their station shouldn't act so familiar." Komaeda's sharp tone and cruel words silenced Hinata, and even made him take a step back. Mitarai swallowed down the spark of guilt and silently accepted Komaeda's praise. "I know it's not much, but I'm guessing Dio needs a body to actually reach Heaven, right? That's what all this was about, right?"

"Y-Yes." Mitarai nodded. It was supposed to come after Somebody To Love saved everyone and-

"Then take mine!" Komaeda said. He gave no time for Mitarai to react when he threw out his arms wide open and stared into the sky with swirling eyes. "Dio! You can have my body! For the sake of Hope, I'll reject my individuality!"

Apart from a horrified gasp from Hinata from somewhere, there was complete silence in the room after Komaeda's proclamation.
Mitarai felt a chill crawl over him and, before he knew it, Komaeda's body began to convulse. As if he was forcing his body to accept this new presence that was entering it and slowly twisting it to serve the will of Dio. Spit gushed down the sides of his mouth and it almost looked like he was having a seizure.

Komaeda froze up and then fell to the ground.

Sagishi almost ran over to him, if it wasn't for Hinata holding him back. The Ultimate Imposter still reached out an arm and screamed, "Mitarai, please! There's always another way! Don't let yourself become a monster because you think you already are one. You're my friend!"

"Will you shut the hell up? If I had to hear your blathering for as long as Ryota has done, I'd have erased you with Holy Diver." Komaeda said, all of a sudden. His body shook as he forced himself up and the voice was different now, mixed in with one that Mitarai hadn't heard in so long. It was more scornful than he'd have liked, as the man looked at Hinata and Sagishi with contempt. "Did you think you could steal my friend from my side, Imposter? Did you think you could simply run away after what you have done, Izuru? You two are no more than cowards seeking to steal the scraps now that their master is dead. You think I, Dio, will be stopped in my moment of triumph?"

Komaeda took a few steps forward before shooting his right arm out and, before Mitarai even knew it, it coiled around the back of his neck. Komaeda was staring at Hinata and Sagishi as he pushed Mitarai's head towards his own and their lips met. He felt a tongue push against his lips and teeth and opened it to let it explore his mouth.

"Dio?! What are you doing? Mitarai's cheeks turned red, he felt like a teenager again, and even thought about moving back.

But he decided to simply let the tongue invade his mouth. It was how his friend was and Mitarai had normally let him take control whenever they kissed or were in bed. It wasn't as if it was different from before and, most importantly of all, he was back. They were together again!

What was a little show of affection?

A lot, it turned out. He was released while his friend smirked at the sight of Hinata and Sagishi glowering at him with poorly-concealed fury. The amount of hatred in their eyes was almost intimidating, if Mitarai didn't have Somebody To Love. His friend wasn't afraid, however, as Get Lucky flexed their muscles behind him and he personally stretched out his arms again as if to welcome them.

"It's useless." Komaeda-no, Dio grinned and cried out, "Useless, useless, useless, useless, USELESS!"

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Dio Brando breathed in the air that filled his lungs. He embraced the sense of touch that had been denied to him. All around him was the look of pure adoration and joy from Ryota and of fear and loathing by Izuru and Sagishi. The fools who had dared turn their back on Dio and would soon pay the price.

Everyone would soon pay the price.
How long had he spent being nothing more than a mere corpse left in anguish in Ryota's personal room?

Komaru Naegi would be utterly erased from reality when he was done with her, along with Fukawa, Kishibe, her brother, and the rest of Class 78. They would only exist as tales of woe for whoever dared challenge Dio Brando's supremacy.

But first, he needed to deal with a few malcontents and have Ryota send out his transmission.

"Ryota, did I ever tell you how useful you can be?" Dio said, letting his and Komaeda's voices combine. "I once said that Luck is the most dangerous Talent to the plans of I, Dio, and now that very Talent serves my ambition!"

Don't Stop Me Now and Land of Confusion were just being held back because of Somebody To Love. Yet it was not only the Requiem that they feared would strike them down.

No, not just the Requiem. They feared the Stand that Dio now commanded. The Stand that would otherwise doom their user if not for one thing. The Talent that Dio now possessed!

Dio Brando was now the Ultimate Luckster.

"Get Lucky is a Stand that threatens even the user with uncertainty. A Stand that I, Dio, would have never wished upon myself! Uncontrollable! Without direction! But now? Now, with my Luck Talent?! I am the Ultimate Master again!" His cry echoed throughout the building.

Hinata stepped forward and Don't Stop Me Now's body now showed a dark storm where there was once a blue sky. "Let him go, Dio. You have no idea what you're doing."

"Oh don't I?" He asked teasingly. Eyes flickered to the figure just by the entrance of the control room and Dio smirked. "Makoto Naegi! Aoi Asahina! Have you come to be here as well? Come and join us! Your presence makes more sense than Sagishi's over here. Is KFC not a thing anymore? Is that why you're here?"

"Dio..." Ryota whispered, scolding the barbed joke.

He chuckled and waved off his friend's concerns. "Fine, fine, why should I be cruel? It is a virtue for the victor to be magnanimous in triumph. Ryota, when I give the signal, send out the broadcast."

Naegi and Asahina moved out from the entrance of the control room. They had apparently been lying in wait in case Mitarai tried anything against Izuru or the Imposter. Dio could sense the emotions in the way they walked. The Ultimate Swimmer seemed hardly capable of containing her rage, only held back by Naegi's concern for what would happen.

The so-called Ultimate Hope himself was a flurry of feelings. There was that same bursting fury that Asahina felt, yet there was more to him. Sorrow for the losses he likely felt, knowing how empty his victories were now, and trepidation for what was to come now that Dio had returned. Perhaps he feared what Dio would do to him and his sister.

A fear that he rightfully held. He couldn't help but smirk at the duo. Asahina took a big step forward until Naegi grabbed onto her arm. A smart choice. Mitarai had been ready to use Somebody To Love right then, if Dio wasn't already confident in his Get Lucky.
Dio wondered if the feeling seeping through his body was simply blood rushing through his veins and arteries or if it was simply power. He had returned to the physical world for not even a minute and his enemies looked upon him with fear. They knew what he could do with a Luck Talent and Get Lucky combined.

This was the glory he sought! He'd have accepted anything compared to the misery of being bound to one spot and unable to even express himself. We Built This City had crippled him, but now he was fully restored!

Get Lucky itself had been primed for his use. Both Miracle and Tragedy were filling themselves up and it wouldn't be long until the clear leader would be full and Dio would stand tall above humanity.

The Miracle would see him through!

"Dio...why won't you just go away? Why do you keep haunting us?!" Asahina howled. The Ocean appeared behind her and had the same look of anger, water rushing and bubbling inside of it, but Dio paid little mind.

"You have to stop, Dio! I mean it! This isn't like Hope's Peak. I'm not going to give you the chances I gave before; not after what I learnt about what you've done." Naegi said. It was almost cute how he thought that could threaten the power of Dio Brando.

"Asahina, I see you've found a replacement to Oogami to latch onto. But it's unsurprising that you chose him. He was always popular in the old days. I actually liked you, Naegi. You reminded me of Ryota and your Talent interested me. Far more chaotic than Komaeda's pattern-based Luck. Good and bad in an eternal cycle." Dio let himself enjoy the sight of all three of his opponents almost stepping back. "That's why you're holding back, isn't it?" He asked, despite knowing the answer.

Both the Miracle and Tragedy were almost full. Both the good and bad luck of Dio's possession must have been affecting it, allowing the two to fill up simultaneously. That must have been it! Fate had not only given Dio a body but a Stand like none other!

Can your will overcome that of mine and Ryota's together?! Can it happen twice? Dio tried to laugh out loud, but quickly stopped himself. Komaeda's laugh was too wheezy and it undermined Dio's aura of dominance. It doesn't matter. When I reach Heaven, I will have my original body restored. Just as it should be!

He remembered the metal coils choking the life out of him, the wooden guillotine that held him in place, and the blade slicing through flesh and bone to take off his head. He could remember the electric energy searing off his skin after We Built This City had betrayed him. It was like his skin had been flayed off itself.

That would be repaid in kind. Just as soon as he reached Heaven and attained a Stand that could dominate this world!

All Dio would need were the thirty-six souls of sinners, the piece of his corpse, and a Friend that the new being would be able to trust. Ryota was fine, but Dio was now ready to receive the new being for himself. The entire world would watch in awe as their Ultimate Master would reach the co-ordinates where he would be re-born as the God of this world!

And those co-ordinates were...
They were...

What was going on?

The numbers were in his head just a moment ago. Clear as day itself. He would recite them to himself so that he would never forget. How could he forget the visions that gave him the strength to remain in this plane?!

Dio resisted showing his cold sweat. That was just what Izuru, Sagishi, Naegi, and Asahina would notice and use to strike. There could be no weakness.

It was fine. He would remember it eventually. All he had to do was keep calm and trust that his new Stand, freshly taken from Komaeda, would secure his victory.

If anything, Dio was now chuckling to himself. He had won, now that he had a body of his own, and Dio Brando breathed in the air that filled his lungs.

"Ryota, have I ever told you how useful you are?" He said, letting his and Komaeda's voices combine.

There was silence, but not in the way Dio wanted. This was not anger but...confusion? "Dio? What're you doing? Is this a prank?" Mitarai asked, as if Dio was some Alzheimer's patient!

"Komaeda...why?" Izuru asked. His voice was mournful as if his emotions were anything but an AI implant!

*What's he talking about? Izuru, just what do you think you are-* Dio's stopped in their tracks when he saw him. That stupid happy smile and wave that hid a mind of poison and a rotten soul. Nagito Komaeda's soul was happily greeting him from the confines of their joined minds.

"Hey, Dio! I bet you didn't think this would be happening again!"

"What are you doing?! You swore your body over to me!" Dio howled and let his emotions take hold.

"Yes I did. I swore to you my cancer-riddled, dementia-infected, body to use as you wished. Whether my body can still cash in those checks...well, I've been unlucky recently."

That was why both of them were filling up. Both Miracle and Tragedy were gradually becoming filled with Good and Bad Luck. Komaeda, and now Dio by proxy, had the luck to still be alive, and yet the bad of having his diseases in the first place.

The frontotemporal lobe dementia and stage 3 malignant lymphoma that cursed Komaeda had now cursed Dio.

"When you don't get treatment, cancers tend to grow. It's bad enough that I got told I had months to live, but it's even worse when you pass the deadline for chemo. I mean, how long do you have until then? Me? I've been waiting to find out ever since Spiral High-School and that was with treatment."

"Before Hope's-? You mean to say that you've been on borrowed time for years now?!!" He gritted his teeth and wished he could tear Komaeda's spirit out from his brain and beat him to death. "You
dare to challenge Dio?"

"What's going on? What do you mean? Why are you talking to yourself? Dio, your nose is bleeding." Mitarai's voice gradually rose and became more panicked.

"Damnit! Komaeda, you think you have won? You forget who commands your Talent now!" Dio threw out his arms and activated Get Lucky, white light already filling Miracle whole. "Miracle, come to me!"

The side of Get Lucky that swallowed bad luck and turned it into good had had its fill. Its bloated body burst into an explosion without sound and dissipated into nothing, until the Tragedy would have to occur. Not that it mattered. Dio had won!

He let his cackle echo at the sight of his enemies' defeated expressions. They looked so mortified and yet accepting that fate would side with Dio. Probability itself knelt before him!

Victory was finally his! Humanity would quiver before the feet of Dio Brando! The power he had been destined to attain from the day he met Ryota.

Naegi gasped and pointed to something in the sky. No doubt the good fortune that Dio's Miracle would deliver onto him. He waited for the sound that would signify his eternal dominance.

"DIO!!" A voice he had not heard in years shouted out. Dio gazed up towards the very ceiling of the building and saw him. Juzo Sakakura was standing right on the very top of the broadcast tower with what looked like- a Stand?!

Mitarai's voice stuttered out, "I-It can't be! They said he was dead!"

"You think you're hot shit?" Juzo shouted out. "You're about to see hot shit right here, right now! My life's been a cycle of fuck-ups and eating shit ever since that day, Dio. I've been pissed off at everything in the damn world; including me! I've been letting the sadness, anger, and hatred stir inside me for years! Letting it drag me down! But now I've finally got you where I want you! Because today I fuck up your plans! That weight inside of me becomes the very thing that ends you! You wanna know why?"

"Juzo Sakakura!!! You think you can overcome my Miracle?" Dio did not need to fear. Luck was finally on his side. Talent and Stand Power had combined to create a certainty that he, Dio, would triumph!

"Because all that negativity is going into Mama Said Knock You Out!" Juzo fell back as a golden shining light burst out from seemingly nowhere.

Dio had to avert his eyes and all he heard next was the sound of what must have been a tank round striking against hard metal, someone running towards the control station, and Sagishi, Izuru, Asahina and Naegi all shouting at the same time.

"Mitarai, no! He's not worth it!"

"There's another way!"

"Don't you dare! You have to pay for what you did to Kirigiri!"
"You don't have to die for him!"

"No!" Ryota screamed as Dio heard the sound of his jar being picked up, over metal groaning and cracking apart. "I have to save it! Without the head, we won't be able to reach-"

An explosion came from above and fire burst out from the emerging cracks in the tower. The entire building rocked and Dio grabbed at a railing to keep himself stable, praying that it would not break and send it plummeting to his demise.

How could this be his Miracle?! It didn't make sense.

The only good fortune was that he threw Tragedy in front of him to protect him from the flames. The burst sent it back and caused the fronts of his arms and legs to burn, the skin scorching against the touch of his sleeves and trousers. That didn't matter; that important thing was that he was still alive.

He opened his eyes and found that the bridge remained stable and that he, Dio, was still alive. The explosion had destroyed most of the roof and the rubble was falling to the outside areas. The flames and force would have killed the Fake Ultimate Boxer in seconds.

Sakakura had failed.

"Ha! You died as you lived! Nothing more than a pathetic, useless..." Dio stopped when he saw that none of the three were paying attention to him. He turned around to see what it was they were looking at and felt all the hope within him drain away. "No...no no no no NO!"

There were three puncture wounds. Each Arrow went vertically from the heart downwards and stopped at the lower half of Ryota's chest; all of them were stuck tight in there. It was obvious even from afar. Ryota had been blown back by the blast and landed right between the quartet of Izuru, Naegi, Asahina, and Sagishi. Dio didn't need to look at the destroyed control station to see that the head of his former body did not survive the blast.

It was destroyed.

The vital part of his plan to attain Heaven had been destroyed, his Friend was going to die, and Dio's had just lost his Miracle.

The first to react was Naegi, who already summoned Livin' On A Prayer to his side, "Maybe we can still save him. My Stand could-" Naegi stopped talking when Sagishi held his shoulder and shook his head whilst weeping.

"Hinata, Naegi, you both did your best..." He said, before turning to Ryota. Dio barely had the strength to move his legs, let alone run at them and use the distraction to his advantage. "Mitarai, does it hurt?"

Dio wanted to hiss that of course it hurt, but he couldn't say anything. Ryota interrupted him with a loud and hacking cough that spat out more blood than Dio thought his friend had. He could only gaze up at the three and whisper out his words.

"No...it doesn't hurt at all...funny...I always thought it'd hurt..." Ryota said, when he wasn't spitting out blood. He struggled to crane his head up so he could face Dio with a nervous smile. "Dio...I did my best...right? We came so close...but at least we tried. All the bad things I did...I guess I can't atone after all...I guess I'll never find Heaven now. Sorry...but I think I'm going to sleep
now...nothing I did ever helped anyone, in the end. Just misery and pain. Naegi...please be who I thought you weren't...I don't deserve happiness...but humanity does...When you find Kirigiri in Heaven- when you find everyone- tell them I'm-

Ryota let his head go back and his body relaxed with one final breathe.

No...NO!

Dio could not accept that this was the end. It couldn't be! "The head! I can bring you back, if you still save the head. We never needed the anime! All we need is the piece of Holy Diver to..." He trailed off. What was it that he needed the Stand piece for? It was something important! "I remembered! I knew what it was for. How could I, Dio, be forgetting now?"

"Oh, is that your name? You'll have to forgive me. I can't seem to remember how I got here. Mind giving me my body back?"

"What?! What are you-" Dio stopped when he finally realised something.

Get Lucky was filled to the brim with black light when it silently exploded. Dio knew that it would never be coming back and that this was the moment where everything would collapse. His pupils dilated and his eyes looked almost pure white.

"The diseases. The worst possible Tragedy that I, Dio, could face!" Dio felt his body lose more strength and fell to the ground. He was on his hands and knees before the three who could still save him. Forget pride! He needed to survive, just like he always did! "Asahina, do you really want to live a life where your friends either die or suffer in agony? Izuru! I can show you the way to bring back those close to you. Sagishi, your classmates will live in eternal regret and self-loathing when the weight of their sins strikes them. Ryota deserves a happier ending than this! Naegi! I can bring back all those you lost! Just simply give me one of your bodies and I will-"

"Shut up. Just shut up." Asahina hissed. "Sakura, Yuta, Kirigiri...knowing that you're gone will have to do. No matter how unfair it is...I'll never accept your world as a replacement! I'd rather die!!"

"I'm not an observer anymore, Dio." Sagishi growled.

"Don't act as if you know about our struggles." Izuru spat out.

Naegi looked down with sad but pitiless eyes. "Dio, this is the fate you've chosen."

How could this be?! He could feel his mind fracturing from within as Komaeda's soul seemed to find new strength. As if it realised that there was a new arrival and wanted to evict him as soon as possible. Dio would not leave without a fight!

Even as the war within the mind waged, the war within the body was already lost. Dio felt his organs slowly begin to grind and fight against him, as if the task of surviving was too much, and his throat was being choked by an invisible force.

In both mind and body, Dio Brando was dying.

No! I finally had it. The way to reach Heaven. Complete peace of mind. I was to finally find happiness. Dio noticed Ryota laying on the ground with the Stand Arrows through his body. How did-Never mind! He knew what had to be done to save this! The thirty-six souls! The pieces of Holy
Diver! My friend! You were my friend! The one who would enable my rise to the top! Why can't I remember your last name, Ryota?

Dio tried to force himself up and attempt to break through. His reward was stumbling to the ground and retching up an entire pool of blood. A soft laugh echoed throughout his own skull.

"I think I remember why I gave you this body. I think I know why I'm doing this." Komaeda's voice softly echoed through the wind from somewhere in the building. Dio wondered why no one else could hear him. Where was that voice coming from? "Goodbye everyone. It seems like Dio and I are to be the last stepping stones for Hope. If I had to choose a way to die, I wouldn't mind this one."

Shut up! What does a fool like you know about resolve? Get out of my body! It was only when Dio stared down at his too-pale skin and skeleton-like body that his blood ran cold. But this isn't my body. What happened? Why am I here now?

"This can't happen to me!" Dio screamed, throwing his hands over himself. "Holy Diver! Negate these wounds! Holy Diver? Where are you?" Where was it? Holy Diver was meant to make Dio into a God! "Am I without a Stand?! No! This cannot happen to me! I am the Ultimate Master. I rule over Hope and Despair as a God! I will be the one to dominate humanity for all eternity!"

Tears fell down his eyes as he fought his hardest against the cold touch spreading around his body. The dark presence creeping over his back and the inevitability of his demise.

"I am Dio Brando! I am Dio! I am-" He couldn't speak anymore. Dio felt his heart tighten around him and the entire world went pure-white for a brief moment. When he came to, he saw what looked like three strangers picking up a body next to burning machinery. A woman was standing aloof, staring at the corpse with hate-filled eyes, but did nothing to stop them.

What kind of bizarre scene had he ended up in?

"Who are you? Why aren't you helping me?!" He screamed. Didn't they know who he was?!

"Thank you, Hinata. I'm not a fan of feeling the despair of dying, but this is good enough."

Dio ignored the voice in his head and focused on what was useful to him, "Hinata? Is that your name?" He asked, making his voice pitiful enough that even those with a heart of ice would surely notice it. "Please, help me! I will reward you if you just get me to a hospital. Do you know who I am? I'm Dio Brando! You know Hope's Peak? I'm going to be a student. I'm sure of it!"

It was as if he was choking on his own blood. When he coughed and the red liquid spewed down his chin, he realised why the feeling was so real to him. Why weren't these people helping him?! Did they think this was funny? Leaving him in a place he did not recognise? He didn't even have the strength left to see what kind of god-awful clothes he was wearing.

He finally recognised the person in the fat man's arms. Yes...it was his friend. What happened to him?

"Ryota, who did that to you? I will get back at them a thousandfold. Do you understand?" Dio choked the words out and fought to keep back the darkness surrounding him. His body was slow and weak and yet it was the pain in his skull that was the worst.

It didn't even hurt. It just numbed him.
In the battle of Hope's Peak, Dio Brando had survived only through the strength of his soul. The laws of the afterlife in this world bound him to his body, at the cost of his Stand, and kept him from the world of humans until he could find a body willing to accept him. A body where he could maintain his sense of self.

Yet this had risks. When Komaru Naegi banished him with her Stand, it did more than simply weaken his soul once more. It near-destroyed him. Dio Brando was made into nothing more than a shell reliant on those around him. If he inhabited a body with too strong a will, or was expelled from one again, it was likely that he would lose his sense of self.

What was Dio without that? His soul would collapse into nothing just like his body had.

No Stand in this world could resurrect someone without having their soul. With this final death, Dio Brando finally became nothing in this plane of existence.

He was not Ryota Mitarai. He had no classmates or friends to bitterly weep over his corpse out of regret for not being able to save him. The man who feared his own identity who did not know how to forgive himself for letting his friend fall into Despair. The man who wanted to reclaim the future who had to accept that he could not create the perfect future.

Even the man who lost his best friend to Mitarai wept. He came so close to managing to rescue someone, even if they had come so close to bringing about a foul and wretched despair to the world, only to once again fail and see another victim of Dio perish because of his influence.

Nagito Komaeda, in his final weeks, had sacrificed his body to create the perfect trap. Dio would have a body and a Stand of his own. He would also be infected with the diseases that only Ultimate Luck could hold back. His friends would weep for him too. The man they couldn't understand, who was manipulative just as much as he was tragic, but was still their friend.

Dio, however, would only have his death celebrated. His army was broken and doomed to defeat, his followers either renounced or died with him, and his death was a pathetic affair. He would never reach Heaven, nor would his terror ever return to haunt humanity.

Thus ended the life of Dio Brando. Mind, body, and soul. Now and forever.

It was finally over.

The sun was shining brightly in the early morning. White clouds gently drifted along as if the world hadn't teetered on the edge of certain doom.

Hinata closed his eyes and let the sunlight wash over him, as he stood just a few feet away from the steps leading up to the ship. The sea breeze gently kissed the skin that wasn't holding onto the
gurneys carrying the bodies of the fallen.

How long had it been since the world had seen a blue sky above? There were areas like Towa City and Jabberwock Island that had been freed from the curse of The Tragedy. The pollution that Souda unleashed had been purified in much of the world months ago, but the scars remained.

Now he was hearing reports that the whole world was enjoying clear skies for the first time in years. That nations were beginning to rebuild themselves and that the Remnants of Despair were dying out without a leader to guide them. It was still fragile, and even the slightest challenge could cause another war.

"Are you taking the body with you?" Hinata turned to see the man asking that question.

Makoto Naegi was staring at the two bodies that had a clean white blanket each draped over them. They had been cleaned long ago to make sure that the blood from their wounds didn't stain them. Tsumiki, Sagishi, and Hinata had all worked hard to keep the bodies looking dignified in death.

Hinata wondered what people would say if they saw that frown on Naegi's face. He was staring down at Mitarai's body on the right not with anger, like Asahina did, but of disappointment.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel the same. In him and myself. Mitarai died swearing loyalty to Dio and trying to rob humanity of its free will. Hinata had offered the hand of friendship and Mitarai chose to Dio over them. Despite everything that he had seen him do.

Maybe if Hinata had arrived earlier, or had brought everyone in Class 77-B to try and win him over. Instead, he let them busy themselves with the battle outside. Maybe the sight of Dio's victims managing to rebuild themselves might have shown Mitarai that Hope didn't come from Dio.

They might have stopped Komaeda from doing what he did.

"Whatever his faults, and I'm not asking you to ever forgive him for them, he was our classmate and a fellow part of Ultimate Despair. Whether he knew it or not." Hinata said. He stared down at Mitarai with pity. "His parents probably died with everyone else. There's no family plot, so I thought we might as well bury him in the memorial."

"It's a reminder of everything Dio took from us. It makes sense that our classmate would be buried there." Sagishi said heavily. He was doing his best to keep his voice steady and eyes clear.

Naegi put a hand on Sagishi's shoulder, and Hinata turned his attention to Komaeda. "I knew that he didn't have much time, but I didn't think he'd try and sacrifice himself. He tried making a martyr of himself in the Neo-World Program as well, so I should have seen it coming. It got the job done, but there was supposed to have been another way. Dio's soul might have left this plane, if his head was destroyed in the fire. All without Komaeda sacrificing what time he had left."

"Maybe he wanted to know for sure?" Naegi offered.

"Maybe." Hinata never quite knew what was going through Komaeda's head.

Maybe he wanted to give his death some meaning, or maybe he thought his Luck would pull him through. There was no point in guessing a dead man's thoughts.

Hinata turned to Naegi and smiled softly, and said, "Feel free to come and visit any time you like."
Probably should wait a year or two though. We'd like to keep attention away from Jabberwock Island."

"I wish it didn't have to be like this." Naegi replied regretfully.

"We don't mind. This was the path we decided a long time ago." Sagishi finally looked away from Mitarai's body and towards Naegi. "The outside world needs a symbol of hope and that can be found in martyrs. They'd hate us anyway, even if we explained ourselves, so why not create a villain? Let Mitarai be remembered for what he deserved to be remembered for."

Ryota Mitarai would be remembered as the only student of Class 77-B to have not fallen to Despair; and was punished by being brainwashed and murdered by the Remnants of Despair. The mad dogs of Dio Brando hijacked his work and turned it into a brainwashing device used on him and others. A plan that would let them massacre the Future Foundation and then brainwash the world itself.

Only the determination of the survivors of their awful attack, combined with emergency reinforcements from Towa City and Future Foundation bases, managed to stop them and drive them to the sea.

Humanity would know the constant threat of Despair, but would believe in those who had stood against them before. The memory of this attack would soon fade and mankind would forget how close it came to losing the peace it fought for. It would simply know that people died to save it.

As for the broadcast itself, Hinata and Souda managed to work with the Alter Ego AI to create a counter-broadcast. Don't Stop Me Now and Hinata's Animator Talent- with help from Sagishi- worked together and managed to free most of the victims. The broadcast was now on a loop until they were sure that everyone had been cured.

So ended Mitarai's plan to conquer the world in a single night.

Naegi looked uneasy with what would happen to Class 77-B now. Hinata knew that the Ultimate Hope wanted something more for them; something to give them a normal life again. The fact that he entrusted them with one of the three remaining Stand Arrows was testament to that.

But all Naegi said was, "Thank you for coming here." He bit his lip and looked away. "If you didn't come and help-"

"You'd be like we were until you came and helped us. You and everyone else who believed that we had a chance of atoning." Hinata grabbed hold of Komaeda's gurney and nodded. "Goodbye, Naegi."

"Goodbye, Hinata, Sagishi." Naegi stepped back so that Sagishi could take Mitarai's gurney, and began the walk back to the docks where the others were waiting for him.

It wasn't hard to move both gurneys onto the ship. The entire class were waiting as both Hinata and Sagishi reached the deck and a dozen pair of eyes waited in solemn silence as the gurneys slowly moved forward. Somehow, Hanamura stayed quiet for Komaeda's entrance, while Mikan sniffled at the sight of Mitarai's hidden-away body, even after having helped clean him earlier.

Hinata remembered the peaceful looks on both their faces. Anyone would look at their faces and think they were young men who never had to live troubled lives. The complete opposite of how their lives really were.
Mitarai, I hope you find what you were looking for in the afterlife. I just wish you realised you could have had it here too. Hinata wasn't unrealistic; he knew that Mitarai and Komaeda weren't in Heaven, if there was one. Too many sins had been committed for that.

He did believe that they just had to wait. Wait in purgatory for the rest of the class to stand and argue their case.

Both bodies and the Stand Arrow were placed in a make-shift storage area kept cold thanks to one of the freezer units Souda and Nidai helped build. The bodies would be preserved until the time for the funerals. Hinata and Sagishi put the bodies in a different corner of the room and strapped them down, as if the dead needed space and comfort. He supposed it was for the sake of the dead's dignity.

When they left and re-emerged in the surface, there was a brief period of silence between the class.

All of them had gone through so much and had now not only failed to save a classmate, but lost one as well. The world would never accept them and they risked spending their lives alone with only each other.

Maybe that was why Hinata welcomed Souda's sudden smile with one of his own.

"So what're the orders, captain? We sailing somewhere new?" The mechanic asked energetically.

"I will admit that it is selfish, but I do wish we could do something for Novoselic. I hear that the people there are still trying to survive." Sonia mused, trying to mask desperation with calm pride.

Kuzuryuu sighed and crossed his arms. "We can try something after the burials. But you gotta keep quiet and hidden! Besides, if you get your thing, I wanna get rid of those madman I let run the old gang from back when I was a loser."

"I agree with the Young Master. Just because we have accepted that we won't be forgiven, doesn't mean we shouldn't stop actively atoning." Pekoyama added. Her hand hovered over her kendo blade, whilst Tanaka's booming laugh echoed into the sky.

"The former creatures of darkness shall once again step into shadows. But to preserve the light of hope! The Dark Lord doesn't intend to let the forces of chaos rule over where the forces of light cannot reach."

"I just wish I could take pictures without having to hide. A lot harder to find happy faces when you're not trying to get a good angle while hiding." Koizumi whined, absent-mindedly toying with her camera.

"Land of Confusion may help with that." Sagishi offered, before Saionji let out an over-dramatic gasp of her.

"What?! Pig-feet, don't you think people are gonna panic when they see a flying camera?" The Dancer even wagged her finger as she spoke.

"M-Maybe if we put on disguises? I'm sorry!" Mikan mewled, misinterpreting Sagishi's normal stare for an angry look.

A certain musician threw her hands into the air and screamed, "Alright! Ibuki calls the Jimi Hendrix
cosplay!"

"Perhaps some of us should do with something more...reve-GAH!" Hanamura was taken out by a totally accidental blow to the head by the musician.

"Wherever we go after this, I wanna make sure it's a place where we can kick ass for justice this time. I got a whole lotta moves I wanna try out!" Akane slammed the palm of her right hand against her left bicep.

"That's the spirit, Akane! Don't let anything stop you from unleashing your full potential. Just remember that this is-" Nidai stopped and his eyes widened. He bolted straight for the door. "Everyone clear out! I gotta go shit!"

Everyone quickly got out of the way. They had agreed that the only bathroom on the ship couldn't be destroyed because of Nidai's...powerful bowel movements and the compromise was that he'd do it on the other side of the ship. It'd be nice and far, far, far, very far, away from them. Souda was already pressing buttons on a pad to make the ship start moving.

It didn't stop them from wanting to get as far from Nidai as possible.

Despite that, Hinata couldn't stop himself from smiling. The boat began creaking and it slowly began to leave the docks and head back towards their new home in Jabberwock Island. A place where they could live in peace and harmony alone.

Hinata himself was standing by the bow of the ship alone. Everyone else had already flocked to the sides and Nidai was probably already at the stern by now.

He laughed to himself. It was amazing how easy it was for everyone to put on a happy face and look to the future. A vow to take control of your life was hard when doing it alone; especially when facing the sins they committed for Dio, and everything he did to them.

But he could see it. The future they reached out and would take. Not just for themselves, but for everyone who believed in them. Everyone who died for them.

Hinata only had to turn from the ocean and back to the boat to see them. Nanami playing one of her games, Miss Yukizome holding her hands together, Komaeda laughing at the hope developing, and even Mitarai. He shyly hid behind the backs of the other three, yet was still able to wave at Hinata and sneak a few glimpses at the life he could have had.

All four of them should have been here for this.

To get stuck in yearning for them to be here, and ignoring the people who were already here though, would only ruin the dream they had. Class 77-B would always remember what they had done and what they had lost. It would stick with them forever, but the past wasn't going to control their lives anymore.

Just because it was a hard road ahead, it didn't mean they wouldn't take it.

*It's going to take a long time. I think none of us have really forgiven ourselves. Most think it'll be impossible, but I think it'll come. The time where we can forgive ourselves for what we did.* Hinata turned to face everyone. The people he'd probably spend the rest of his life with.
It didn’t sound bad at all.

"First, let's go home."

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"I don't agree with just letting them go," Munakata let Naegi win the battle of stares and turned his back to the Ultimate Hope. He craned his neck back to say, "But that is the choice you have made. The consequences will fall on your shoulders." He faced the open world and took a step forward.

"Munakata, where are you going to go now?" Naegi asked nervously.

That made him stop and think. Munakata had once dreamed of being the Headmaster of Hope's Peak Academy once, then he dreamed of being the man who helped exterminate every trace of Despair in a wounded world. Both dreams were never going to happen now.

The left side of his face had red scars scattered over it, but nothing too disfiguring. That belonged to the right side of his face, where he was missing an eye, and the skin between the bottom of his eyelid and the top of his mouth revealed the inner flesh and bone. It made his whole face appeared sunken and drained of life. Munakata looked less like a man and more like a lich of sorts.

A monster that belonged in nightmares.

*If I am doomed to be a monster, then let me be a monster feared by other monsters. A warrior in the darkness.* Munakata had to atone for what he had done. His paranoia enabled the Final Killing Game going as far as it did, and had resulted in the deaths of those who had faith in him.

He looked up to the clear sky he had fought for. "I am going to ensure that no dark force emerges again." He said, just loudly enough that Naegi could hear him. "We never revealed this information to anyone before, but I've heard stories. Stand users in Egypt, the United States, Italy, France, the United Kingdom, and even Japan itself. That there are those who have attained Stands without the use of a Stand Arrow."

"Really?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I intend to find them and see if they are of Hope or Despair." Munakata had his blade and Killing In The Name, if they were threats to the peace of the world. "I'll contact you if the threat is too great, or if they appear a potential danger, but the responsibility is mine."

"I wish you could stay." Naegi said, because of course he would.

Munakata simply replied, "I would be an unwelcome presence. It's better that the old warriors either put down their weapons or die in a last stand."

"There's always a place for you here. You don't have to go out to find death." Naegi's plea made Munakata smile wryly. Would he not have said the same, if he were his Hope's Peak self, speaking to a mournful Sakakura?

That kind of idealism might have saved the life of his friend- instead of him dying because of Munakata's actions.
"Maybe, maybe not. I intend to learn while on this trip." Munakata looked back one final time. "Farewell, Makoto Naegi." He said, before resuming his walk.

No one would recognise him as the poised, well-kept and handsome Vice-Chairman of the Future Foundation. All they would see is a wounded survivor making his way to a place they didn't care about. It gave him the chance to leave this battlefield behind without having to say goodbye to any fool wishing to join him.

The war had ended and he spent most of the final battle arguing with Naegi; almost sabotaging the war because he didn't trust anyone else with the peace.

Munakata needed to find something. He would be the eternal protector of Hope, but there was another reason for him leaving. So much had happened over the years that he simply buried within his mind. The things he had to do, not just today, had to be processed. The woman he loved who was forced into Despair, the mentor who was corrupted, and the best friend who died saving the world.

What did he do? Had he accomplished anything of worth?

In seeking to destroy Despair, I almost became it myself. I risked being a dark hope. Munakata wondered if he thought this was any better.

He was leaving behind his support-structures and potential friends, old and new, behind when they couldn't stop him from falling. Now he expected to stay righteous when on his own apart from a sword and a Stand?

No. He was not alone. By his side walked the ghosts of those who were always by his side. To his left was Chisa, shining on like the sun itself, warming everything around her, and to his right was Juzo, who always believed in Munakata and was ready for any fight ahead.

The ghosts of his past were walking beside him just as much as they looked down from Heaven.

Would he ever be able to move on from the Tragedy? Would he even want to? There was so much he had done in the name of Hope, and now he was no more than a single man.

There was no time for regrets, however. Only for looking to the future and embracing what comes next with determination and a belief that he would overcome it.

"Is that not Hope?" He asked, gazing up into the sky, before sighing to himself. "I suppose I'll just have to find out on my own."

For better or worse, Munakata took the first steps in his new life.

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Seiko only slept for about six hours, but it felt like she had been dreaming for a whole day. Her body and mind acted yet she was not in control. Almost half-disconnected from her body, in hindsight, and acting in a way she never would in a normal state of mind.
She knew why she had been sleeping. It wasn't that she was wounded- indeed, she was one of the few who weren't- and more that Branch Heads had a certain privilege that others did not. That went especially so for when you were one of a handful of surviving Branch Heads.

The Ultimate Pharmacist opened her mouth and was relieved that her mask had finally been returned to her.

The same couldn't be said for seeing Ruruka kneeling at bed-side.

"You probably know what I did to you." Ruruka murmured, her head lowered and voice quiet. It was unlike her usual manner. "You probably hate me."

There were black spots in Seiko's memory, but she remembered enough. She remembered breaking free from Yukizome's Another Brick On The Wall and immediately thinking of some way that she could try to create a cure. A way to counteract the poison; even using White Rabbit to assist.

Instead, she found herself falling under the sway of Sugar Sugar. Her mind was like that of an addict's, searching for the next fix while her mind and body were on auto-pilot. Ruruka using her new-found power to mock and humiliate her. To use her as a tool to take over the Future Foundation, if not the world.

Seiko also remembered tearing through Kizakura's chest with her claws and tearing his guts out. He died smiling, for some reason.

That wasn't Ruruka's fault. Seiko wanted to blame the confectioner despite the fact that the fault lied with Mitarai for brainwashing her into becoming a slave to Dio, and then did the same to Ruruka. If it hadn't been for Sugar Sugar, she'd have remained a slave to Mitarai.

If it hadn't been for Sugar Sugar, she'd have been able to save people.

Even if it was just one person, it would have still meant something!

"You made me a tool, all so you could force me to obey you..." Seiko didn't have much energy left in her body. She spoke in long drawn-out pants of breath. "I could have saved people...I could have been useful, and instead I was simpering after you..." She said venomously.

Ruruka nodded and accepted the harsh words without complaint. It was almost off-putting in itself.

"I know. You probably hate me more than you ever did before." Ruruka finally looked Seiko in the eye, through her own tear-soaked ones, and asked, "But, even so, could you please help me?"

Seiko felt a fire flare in her stomach and the disgust she felt took over. "Why the hell would I ever do-"

"Someone has to bury him." Ruruka stared down and her voice shook. "He never minded where he was buried, but there was a place we found. Back in The Tragedy, we wanted it there. It was so nice and quiet. A little hill pretty close to here where you could sit in peace. But...I need help. I'm not that strong so moving him is hard and I don't want to be alone when burying him and no one else really knew him and."

"Ruruka, I really just want to sleep. I want to sleep and pretend that the place I called home wasn't destroyed and I couldn't do a damn thing." Seiko didn't even have the strength to hate Ruruka. Not
after seeing her weep and mewl like she just did. "Can't you do this one thing yourself?"

"I can't." She replied staring down at her hands

"What do you-" Seiko stopped when she leaned over and saw just what Ruruka was looking at.

The Ultimate Confectioner always treasured how nice and soft her skin was. It was a show of how 'cute' she was. Just like how her sweets were perfect and flawless, so was her body. Izayoi liked them that way too, even when they showed just how rough his own hands were.

Now? They were bright red from how raw they were and were still drenched in soapy water. As if she had to handle water and a flannel for hours without stopping. Seiko only just realised that she wasn't in the position she fell to sleep in. Ruruka probably moved her to keep her clean after all the dirt and blood on her.

Her knees looked scuffed as well!

"Everyone's busy with making sure that nobody killed themselves after Mitarai died. Somebody To Love...it does something to them. Made Mitarai their most beloved thing so when he died." Ruruka sniffled. "I had to help. There were wounds and people needing to be moved around in their beds and Sugar Sugar was good at distracting them. Only now it hurts using a shovel and I wasn't all that strong to begin with and they saw Yoi-chan's body doesn't have long until even all the cleaning I did won't matter."

Seiko stayed silent and let Ruruka cry for as long as she needed to cry. They were probably talking about rigor mortis making the body rigid, which must have been difficult to accept just when someone close to you died.

She was within her rights to refuse and make Ruruka ask someone like Makoto Naegi or Aoi Asahina. They'd probably forgive Ruruka no question. Why did she have to keep coming to Seiko? Because no one else was there when she saw her lover kill himself to save her. When she broke free and stopped you from serving Despair.

Seiko wondered if her mind was truly going to forget the fact that Ruruka was the one who brainwashed Seiko first.

Ruruka wasn't being forgiven that easily.

"I'll help you move the body, but I'm not going to be your shoulder to cry on." Seiko said, which made Ruruka look at her with confused yet hopeful eyes. "You're not going to be forgiven just because you're hurting."

"What happens now?" Ruruka asked. She sounded as lost as Seiko was as a child, before she met Ruruka and Izayoi.

This time, Seiko shuffled and showed her back to Ruruka, and said, "We'll bury Izayoi. I know what he meant to you. After that, I'll see what happens to the Future Foundation and go from there. You do what you want."

"Okay."

It was easy to come to pity someone like Ruruka. A lot harder to do when you were a victim of her selfishness the way Seiko had been. This was only the first step, if even that, on Ruruka's path to
earning Seiko's forgiveness for what she had done in the Killing Game.

*She has to earn it. After everything she did.* Seiko didn't entirely blame Ruruka. Her logical and self-loathing sides wouldn't allow it. Sugar Sugar's effects were clear from Yukizome's fascination with Ruruka and the Pharmacist should have reacted accordingly.

That was why she would help the girl by her bedside bury her lover. It would be a good chance to see if Ruruka actually meant what she said or not. To see if she was truly going to respect Seiko or if she wanted to avoid being alone now that Izayoi was dead.

It wasn't much, but it was all Seiko could do. Maybe she would forgive Ruruka some day or maybe she wouldn't. The Future Foundation might survive or it might collapse and either something or nothing would take its place. Seiko didn't know what would happen in the next few days.

But that didn't mean she couldn't make herself useful.

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The group, made up of the remaining survivors of Class 78 and the Towa City Rescue Team, all sat in a circle by the entrance of the Future Foundation Headquarters and looked to one another. Everyone was waiting for someone else to say what was on their minds.

All of them had fought Dio's machinations in some way and they had come together to keep Mitarai from ensuring Dio's return from the grave. Class 78 at Hope's Peak, the Rescue Team in Towa City, and now here. There was a very clear and open absence among their number.

An absence that would always be there. A person who would always be in their hearts until the end of time.

Naegi and Komaru had finally been reunited and got all the mushy feelings out of the way before they sat down with everyone else. Togami tolerated Fukawa's feverish greeting, mostly because she didn't mention his limp left arm, the scar along his face, or the way his legs strained when running, and Rohan and Asahina didn't suddenly fight with each other.

The worst was Hagakure and the Oingo Boingo Brothers arguing over who was the better fortune-teller.

That was a pretty big success. Here they were, getting along, at the end of all this.

"So what now?" Togami asked. He flexed his left hand as the doctor ordered. It was the only way for it to keep even a limited form of mobility. "The Future Foundation has been destroyed. We can blame the Remnants of Despair, but we still have to decide what to do now."

Asahina spoke up with a hint of desperation in her voice. "We have two of the the Stand Arrows. If Hinata and Mitarai's Requiems let them do what they did, then maybe."

"I wouldn't advise that." Rohan interrupted her. He turned to Naegi and said, "These Arrows reply to a great and desperate need when giving Requiem, but you have to be at your absolute lowest or have achieved the will to use it. Fail, and you might have a rogue Stand Requiem. Not exactly what the world needs, is it?"
"You're pretty smart, Rohan-sensei." Komaru said, her eyes bursting with admiration.

"Smart for a two-bit mangaka who sucks up to whoever's nice to him." Fukawa muttered.

"Don't you have the next Fifty Shades of Grey to write? No, that's probably too high-brow for you." Rohan replied. Fukawa growled and was about to stand up from her seat when Komaru started growling herself.

"Touko, Rohan, you've been fighting all day!" Komaru paused and muttered, "Okay, technically, you've been fighting all night and morning, but that's not the point!"

Hagakure chuckled and threw a hand up. "I'm checking my crystal ball, and Boingo's checking his manga, and In The Year 2525 and Thoth's saying it clear. Well, as clear as a picture of the sun over a building can be and whatever that thing in his manga means," He gave a thumbs up, while Boingo and Oingo were harshly whispering to themselves. "Naegs, our future's looking bright."

"Fantastic. Now let's get to the how." Togami said, instantly deflating Hagakure's good mood.

_Togami's got a point. The war's over, but what do you do after that?_ Naegi couldn't deny what his friend was saying. They had two of the three Stand Arrow now, which was good, and they had the Warriors of Hope surrender to them. They were willing to go through therapy and try to make up for what they did.

Monaca Towa was in space, but it seemed that her murder of Kirigiri was some kind of 'farewell act'. She said she was happy to live in space now. Komaru thought otherwise and said she'd come back down when she realised that there was nothing up there.

Naegi wasn't going to get revenge on a child who idolised a monster because he was her paternal figure. He was going to make sure that she saw justice and that she'd have to face up to what she did when she returned.

Other than that, Naegi didn't really have an idea of what to do. Seeing everyone look at him for answer was doing terrors to his nerves and he felt like shrinking into his dirty, ruined suit.

"I guess the first thing is making sure everyone's alright..." He said uneasily. Better to go with the small-stuff first. _"When Mitarai died, everyone he infected with his Stand fell into depression. Andou's trying her best with Sugar Sugar, but-"

"We'll try to help as much as we can, Makoto." Komaru said.

Togami raised an eyebrow and leaned back. Well, he tried to, before his legs gave out and his right arm gripped the side of his chair. He hissed from the bandages around his chest moving. "And after that? What do we do to make sure that the world has something to inspire them again? They'll need some kind of proof that this world's not going to be so different from the one Dio destroyed. It was flawed, but it was home."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but Togami's right. People are going to need to know that this war is over, but also have something to replace the Future Foundation with. Something they can believe in and see." Asahina said. She looked round the group. "Any ideas?" She asked.

Naegi had an idea. It was something no one would have suggested during the Tragedy and definitely
He thought back to the days when everything was so bright. Dio was seemingly a member and friend of Class 78, everyone managed to come together despite their different characters, and were able to forge tight bonds with one another. He thought back to a time where the world wasn't perfect, but it was a good enough place.

Hope's Peak was corrupted by the thirst for Talent. The idea that Hope would come from some individual so amazing at everything that people would fall at their feet in amazement. In a lot of ways, it matched how Dio saw and treated Talent like it was something greater than people.

Maybe the idea itself wasn't flawed. A place for people of talent to come and learn to develop them, but by prioritising education and people above nurturing talent. Where the Reserve Course wasn't a lower-caste of people.

Building a school also appealed more to Naegi than building a new army.

"Hagakure, you said that you saw a sun brightly shining over a building, right?" Naegi asked, making Hagakure raise an eyebrow. "What did that building look like?"

"What're you thinking of? It better not be something weird, Naegi. We just got back from playing municipal workers. Don't think we're doing it for free again!" Fukawa snapped, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

"Fukawa's right. I'm going back to my manga. The industry's finally recovering and I refuse to let Pink Dark Boy fall behind again." Rohan added, scoffing at the thought of doing anything else.

Komaru gasped in horror and shook a finger at both. "Where's your public spirit?"

"We'll help, Komaru!" Boingo offered, blushing at Komaru's smile.

"Yeah, sure." Oingo added.

That managed to get Fukawa and Rohan offended and they started bickering with Komaru and then each other. Togami and Hagakure ended up getting involved with arguments of their own and, before you knew it, Asahina was included. Everyone was arguing and bickering at an informal meeting meant to decide the fate of the world.

Naegi couldn't do anything but smile at that.

It was a welcome and warm contrast to the ruined terrain and chaotic rushing about behind him. Just like so much of the world, people were rightly focusing on lowering the human cost, but neglected the fact that the environment suffered as well. Places of beauty became haggard and dead lands, including the old Hope's Peak building.

Coincidentally, Naegi figured out the perfect place for what he wanted to do with his life.

In the distance, a trick of the light revealed the image of a lavender-haired girl and nine other former friends all smiling at him. Some were large and others were small yet knowing. They knew exactly what Naegi was planning and were giving it their full approval.

But it was when Kirigiri gave a soft nod that made him finally try to speak up.
He gave a soft cough and the fighting around him ended. All eyes fell back on him and he couldn't help scratching the back of his head nervously. "Sorry in advance, but I'm going to have to ask a big favour from you guys." Naegi looked around and took a deep breath. "Does anyone here know anything about construction work?"

Sure, everyone looked at him as if he grew another head, but getting the idea out there was the first step! Slowly, but surely, his idea was reaching them as well.

Asahina and Komaru's eyes lit up, Togami and Fukawa seemed cautious yet supportive, and Hagakure and the Oingo Boingo Brothers looked more confused than anything. Really, only Rohan looked apathetic, which probably meant he was fully behind it!

The work would be hard, but that was fine. Headmasters were supposed to be good at delegating and sharing the workload, right?

Makoto Naegi looked to the clear blue skies and smiled. Up above in the clouds were the friends and family who had lost their lives because of one man's hunger and ambition. On the ground were the survivors who would work to rebuild what had been broken. It wouldn't be a perfect world, where everyone knew their fate with certainty, and it would have Despair. But it would be a free world where people would be free to choose their fate and could always find Hope.

That was good enough, right?

**Juzo Sakakura/Mama Said Knock You Out: Dead**  
**Ryota Mitarai/Somebody To Love: Dead**  
**Nagito Komaeda/Get Lucky: Dead**  
**Dio Brando/Holy Diver*: Dead**

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**Stand Stats**

**Mama Said Knock You Out**  
**User:** Juzo Sakakura  
**Stats**  
Destructive Power A  
Speed A  
Range C  
Durability B  
Precision B  
Developmental Potential C  

**Abilities**  
The punching ability of the Stand is strengthened by the extent of negative feelings felt by the user. The greater the amount felt, the stronger the Stand's punches become.
"I am a tool of the Kuzuryuu Gang. I live only for three things." Pekoyama walked towards Mista, her feet wading through the puddle of blood. The police, idiots that they were, thought they could stop her with pistols. "The first is to serve my Master in any way he deems pleasurable. Whether it is killing or torturing others, or even simply humiliating myself, I do it without question."

Mista had to keep calm. He couldn't waste his bullets. Not in a tiny space like this where it'd be so easy for Killing Machine to spit out a hundred blades and trap him entirely.

Pekoyama smiled to herself as she said, "The second is to serve Lord Dio. The man who showed us the futility of Hope and the glory of Despair. In life, he wished for my services in more ways than one. A tool is not meant to feel pleasure, but I cannot deny that he made me feel something approaching humanity. It might have been the hair and eyes, especially when I was paired with Master. But that is beside the point. In death, he is now the symbol of our future. We will serve the Heir in avenging his father."

She was lecturing. Good. That meant she was more concerned with seeing him sweat and panic than making sure there wasn't any way to escape. The room he found himself stuck in, trying to help the soldier and police in the barracks- imagine saying that a year ago- had a window far above that would get him outside. If he used Sex Pistols smart, he could slip out and get somewhere safe.

"But there is a third thing I live for. Something that I wonder if even Lord Dio knew, in his infinite wisdom." Pekoyama said. The way she spoke had changed.

Until now, she'd been like how she was in Venice. Completely without emotion and focusing all her efforts on finding the best method of gutting him like a fish. The only time she ever displayed feelings was when she saw Kuzuryuu get the shit stomped out of him. That flash of panic and fear as she dashed to his side and got a back-hand for her troubles.

This? This was different. This was something a lot more human than a 'tool' would be.

Mista really wished she'd go back to the blank-slate crap she had going. It was a disgrace to see someone meant to be protecting their boss simply turn that idea into destroying their own identity. It sickened Mista to his core to hear her say that she considered her work anything like his.

It was still better than the serial-killer-like smile that cut across her face and the way her red eyes shined in delight. Her tongue reached out to one of the bloody blades and licked a section of it clean.

"Killing." She said, almost drunk from the blood. "The way that the life disappears from the eyes of another as I stab my blade into their flesh. The cacophony of screams depending on how deep the tip can pierce into their bones. I am a tool made to serve, but I become the master of humans when I use my blade." She shivered and licked her lips, creating a red smear around them. "I wonder how you'll act, Guido Mista, when I keep you on the very knife-edge of life and death? Will you beg for mercy,
or will you be defiant to the end?"

"That's a question you're never going to find the fucking answer to!" Mista jumped back and turned to try and land his back against the corner of the room. Climbing using two walls as support was always easier than one.

He wasn't running away. This bitch had too much blood on her hands for his pride to ever accept something like that. What he was doing was simply playing it smart.

She loved killing and torturing people? Fine. Mista could use that. If he interested her, like a cat with its prey, then he'd play the mouse and get her somewhere big and empty. A place where Mista would have a lot of room to avoid Killing Machine's swords and try to get close enough to use Sex Pistols.

In a fight against the Ultimate Swordsman, he would never win in close-range combat. Victory would come from the long-range game; using Sex Pistols to make the bullets go faster and further than normal.

Mista wasn't just fighting for Passione and Italy, important as they were, but something else as well.

Pekoyama insulted him; from her philosophy down to her methods, and his role as Giorno's bodyguard. This wasn't just a battle between Stand users but a battle between two ideas. Was a bodyguard simply an extension of the boss's will, or were they something else?

All he knew, as he climbed the walls and looked carefully at the windows, was that he was going to defeat this psychopath or die trying!

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Johnny had been sitting on his ass for about half an hour, making sure Gyro and Togami were going to make it through, before both woke up at around the same time. He spent about half that time gathering his stuff and pretending to ignore Togami's occasional glares, and then Gyro shooting the heir one in turn. One of them took the news about Naegi better than the other.

It was Togami, who liked to play the 'too good for everyone else' act, who was insisting that they immediately go and pick a fight again.

He was different now. There was nothing but poorly-hidden panic in the way he dashed to his things and packed empty pistols and whatever else could be a weapon into his bag. Spandau was feasting on what few blades of grass there were around this place. Gyro and Johnny were packing their things too for the rescue mission.

There was no sense in letting Naegi die, and they certainly weren't going to let Togami run off and get himself killed.

Johnny just had one problem.

"You have a plan, right?" Johnny asked. "Because riding all the way down to Death Valley and demanding they give him back isn't a plan. We need to think of a way to beat them."

Togami violently stuffed a compass into the bag and shot his head around. "Yes, and while we're
sitting here, licking our wounds, the Remnants get further away from us. Getting closer to where they'll torture the prize they've sought for years now."

That was enough to make Johnny look away. He didn't blame Togami for seeing this as Johnny's fault. Naegi was the big prize that the Remnants of Despair sought for years and he let him hand himself over.

"Don't act like this Johnny's fault. If it wasn't for him, we'd be dead and Naegi wouldn't have any help coming." Gyro shot back, defending his friend for reasons beyond him.

"You should have run! Tusk could have delayed some of them and you might have gotten closer to a base where more time could have been bought. Rescue would have come and we wouldn't be talking about the return of the Tragedy!" Togami snapped. He threw his bag over Spandau and had already tied it to the saddle, before Johnny could even realise what he was doing. "That is why I'm leaving now." He said, ignoring the fact they agreed to go to the base and grab help.

Johnny couldn't hide his shock behind derision as he asked, "Really? I thought we agreed to look to others for help. Togami, if you think this is going to end well for you- going off on your own and thinking you can just win-"

"I don't." Togami began flexing his muscles. Not out of arrogance, but simply to see if they recovered from Akane's attack. "My plan is to distract them and, if you'll come after me as I predict, you will both grab Naegi and head as fast as you can for sanctuary. There's a Future Foundation base a few miles west of Death Valley. Using your Stands in combination, you should be able to reach it in time."

"What about you? You know what they'll do if they have you and lose Naegi?" Gyro asked, beating Johnny to the punch.

"Of course I know," Togami spat. "They'll simply broadcast my slow and painful death for everyone to see in place of Naegi. I'll be whipped, flayed, burnt, poked at, used as a plaything, and if I don't break from despair, or beg for death, they simply kill me. I imagine I'll look quite the wretch when it's over."

He tried to be calm and matter of fact about it. He really did. As if saying it would make it easier to contemplate.

It was still obvious that Byakuya Togami was scared. That might have been why he kept his back to Johnny and Gyro. It was shaking with the rest of his body as he lectured them on the ways he'd be killed. His voice shook when he finally admitted that they'd kill him. The last of the Togami line extinguished in some sick ceremony broadcast worldwide.

Togami spoke in a single breathe and said, "But if I don't, they'll do it to Naegi. They'll do it to the symbol of hope for the entire world and use it to make everyone believe that Dio's legacy is still in command. That he still rules this world even in death. No matter what you do, it'll be useless to resist. That is something I will not allow. What is my life compared to the world itself?"

No one said anything. What could you say? The only sounds you could hear was Togami lacing up Spandau and getting ready to chase Naegi down no matter what.

Johnny saw that resolve and felt ashamed. Would he have ever put his life on the line for Naegi? Offering himself to be some kind of hostage or whatever they wanted from him, if they'd just let
Naegi go. There were a hundred things he should have done and he did the one thing he shouldn’t have.

Letting Naegi sacrifice himself.

Now he was sitting here and letting Togami be the one to throw himself into the fire. All to save the world. Johnny never cared about something so abstract like that. The only reason he came on this trip was to heal his legs.

*What would Jonathan do?* Johnny didn't have to wonder. His brother would have charged ahead, sacrificed himself, and the Remnants would have probably joined the Future Foundation out of shame of killing someone like him. The kind of thing that'd never happen with Johnny. *Jonathan, I'm not you. I don't awe people with my physique, I don't win over the masses by being an impossibly nice guy. I'm...I'm...*

It finally hit him.

Imagine a blockage in a river that lets out a tiny spurt, and then the spurt unleashes a massive flood that cleanses the messed-up trench. That was Johnny's mind.

He would never be Jonathan Joestar. He knew it, his father knew it, Erina knew it, hell even Jonathan knew it.

That was the problem.

He spent all this time measuring himself against the perfect son, brother, and person, and would always be less than zero in comparison. No two people would ever be alike and comparing yourself to someone else by their virtues would only make you look like trash.

Someone who looked at Jonathan Joestar and thought he was the ideal man would never think the same of Johnny. He was small, sarcastic, and drove most of the people around him away. His brother was the exact opposite, never doubting the love of the people around him for one second, and Johnny hated himself because he could never be that.

But what if he compared himself not with Jonathan, but with the person that Johnny Joestar could be?

The time he spent hating himself instead improving himself. It was a long and hard road, one he'd likely never reach the end of, but at least it'd be something! It'd be a goal to reach! It was definitely better than simply sitting and waiting for Naegi to die!

A plan came to Johnny. It was stupid and insane and exactly what would work on those psychopaths.

"Y'know, I think those Remnants of Despair probably still miss Jonathan. Probably enough to still fetishise me as some kind of new version of him, or kill me for not being him." Johnny said, letting the words hang in the air. Gyro caught on immediately.

"Nyohoho. I don't know, maybe some of my jokes can cure them of despair." He said with a laugh.

"That's the first good joke I've ever heard from you." Togami muttered. It wasn't enough to hide his interest in the plan.
The plan for Johnny to make the charge towards Naegi. Gambling it all on the Remnant's hesitation to really kill Jonathan's younger brother.

The problem was that they had to buy Naegi time to escape on Journey when the time came. The Remnants outnumbered them three to one, without Naegi, and could easily just send a group after Naegi. Someone would have to go with him while the other two held them off.

It would be Gyro who'd run. Johnny wouldn't take no for an answer.

The wounds he got from Tanaka still hadn't entirely healed, unlike Togami's, and it would be easier to have him go with Naegi while Johnny and Togami fought a fighting retreat. The sight of one of Dio's killers and 'the Lesser Joestar' would get their attention. Maybe even bait them away.

Johnny turned to Gyro and looked him right in the eye. "I'm not going to lie in the mud and feel sorry for myself anymore. All that's gonna do is get me covered in shit. This time, I'm moving forward."

"Great news! I'm sure we're all behind you on that." A voice that definitely didn't belong to Gyro or Togami said.

No, Johnny definitely recognised that voice. He turned to find a man in a zebra-printed hat, a five-pointed Sheriff star on his left side, and having a recently-acquired scar across his face courtesy of the Remnants of Despair. He was above-average height, had light-hair, and was wearing the closest thing to a stereotypical cow-boy costume.

"You did me a favour after saving me from Safety Dance. Now I have the perfect chance to repay the favour." Mountain Tim said, tipping his hat to the group, mirroring the way their horses bowed their heads to him. "I know what you're thinking. 'Tim, you can easily take on three of those freaks, but what about the others? That still leaves three more, including the kid.' Have no fear. Our illustrious President has heard about these Remnants causing trouble and he wanted me to gather some help."

Behind him were the sounds of multiple boots clicking as a small group trailed behind him. A group that made Johnny wonder if he wasn't just hallucinating in the heat. There must have been just under a dozen of them, but they were almost unreal.

Each one of them wore a flat-brimmed cowboy hat, a green range coat, gun holsters on the side, and a purple shirt and light brown trousers combination. The strangest thing about them wasn't even that they had writing on their hair; both facial and head, depending on which one he was looking at.

It was the fact that every one of them looked alike.

All eleven of them looked nearly identically similar.

"They had you outnumbered three to one? How about we outnumber them for a change?" Mountain Tim chuckled and pointed his thumb back. "Meet the Eleven Riders. You're gonna love their Stand. Mine too."

Togami couldn't stop himself from sputtering while Johnny and Gyro's eyes widened. They knew it was possible to get a Stand from more than just an Arrow. Both Tusk and Ball Breaker were testaments to that. But these riders had a Stand? Tim had a Stand?!
Despite that, Johnny could feel the mood around them change. What was once just shock turned into something warmer and brighter. They were under a clear late morning sun and yet the day only now got brighter. Johnny could actually see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Why?

Because they finally had a chance.

They finally had hope.

---

Izuru watched as Pekoyama pierced her blade through Mista's side and he already knew the result.

She had lost.

The swordswoman was so focused on finally cutting Giovanna's bodyguard that she neglected to keep an eye out for his Stand. She thought she took out all six when she really only took out five. The final one was still in the air, flying from the force of the upward wind from one of her side slashes, when Mista fired his pistol.

Pekoyama smiled when it cut through a few strands of hair. She didn't realise her mistake before it was too late.

The sound of metal being kicked back and she span in time to find the bullet racing straight towards the centre of her forehead. She extended her blade so that she could keep the tip wedged in Mista while still intercepting in time to keep the bullet from going through her cranium and killing her.

She failed to stop the bullet from hitting her in the sword-hand and making her drop the blade.

The metal going through Mista's side dissolved and he moved through the pain to pistol-whip Pekoyama to the floor.

_Boring._ Izuru had expected this outcome from the second that he saw Pekoyama prioritise injuring Mista over the half dozen moves she could have taken to cripple him. Despair had once again driven a member of Class 77-B to ignore instinct and training in favour of gratification.

In the name of achieving pleasure, they threw away victory.

It might have made him angry, if Izuru wasn't bored of it by now.

Mista, although for entirely different reasons, seemed to feel the same way in terms of frustration, "Don't think I know why you got sloppy. It's because you don't give a damn about anyone but yourself and Dio. It's all about you deep down," Mista growled. "All the shit you take from Kuzuryuu. You like it. It gets you off to suffer under this abuse and be dehumanised. It's not because you think he's better than you. It's because of who he is!"

"I serve my Master. He who leads the Kuzuryuu Clan that I owe my existence too." Pekoyama chuckled. "It just so happens that he's the only one left."
"You fuckin' disgust me," Mista spat out. "You think your Stand and Talent make you strong? Well, let me tell you something. You're weak. Anyone can kills dozens of people in this world, especially if they're working for Kuzuryuu. What kind of tool takes pleasure in their job? What kind of tool moves and talks on its own?! You're not a weapon, you're nothing more than tissue- no, toilet paper! Useful for one thing then get blown away. I'm almost mad I didn't take off a finger. You hear that?! I'm almost glad I didn't turn five into four!!! Although technically, it's only four fingers so four becomes three-No you don't!"

Pekoyama had tried to grab her blade again, to bring made the forest of metal that Killing Machine could bring, but Mista kneed her in the face. Her glasses broke and her nose was bleeding when he grabbed her by the hair and threw her to the side.

"You know what? You can't even be used once. Your Master? He just uses you dozens of times to wipe away the shit, and then gets his hand dirty. What does that say about you two?" Mista managed to regain some control of his emotions. "Giorno is my Boss, but he's also my friend. A friend who's been through more with me than you can imagine. I'm his bodyguard, but if I were a tool, I'd be a tool to help shape him into being more than he is right now. Not just enable him because it gets me off to obey orders."

Pekoyama wasn't even listening. Izuru wondered what Mista's point was supposed to be, if not to convince Pekoyama. Was he really just saying this to please himself? Or to prove himself to someone?

Izuru didn't care. He had to save the Remnants again.

If he wanted to truly test Giovanna's Stand Requiem, it would need a situation as stressful as possible and involving him to see the odds as against him. It was convenient that Mista and Pekoyama's battle had taken them to the outskirts of the Colosseum. Tsumiki, Kirigiri, and the remaining members of Passione and the Remnants were there.

It'd be easy to force the two of them inside.

The Ultimate Jumper's Talent of Class 71 was useful for going from the roof of a nearby building to landing just in front of Mista. He seemed so surprised, just when he was moving to knock her out with his pistol again, only to find Izuru Kamukura staring at him. The face of the most feared Remnant of Despair.

The butcher of the Hope's Peak Student Council, the man who only knew Talent, and the wielder of a Stand stronger than Holy Diver.

Boulevard of Broken Dreams had seen Sex Pistols in action and Izuru had brought a revolver of his own. It was child's play for him to use Sex Pistols against Mista; even as the mimicked-Stand lacked the emotional energy of its true user. Izuru being the more effective user made up for it.

The Ultimate Marksman Talent of Classes 3, 23, 37, 43, and 69 helped too.

Mista's revolver fell from his hands when the bullet struck in time, the man himself still in shock at the sight of another Sex Pistols, and he couldn't react in time for Izuru to slam the butt of his revolver right where Pekoyama stabbed the bodyguard. He could feel the body groan in pain from the strike.

It wouldn't kill, or even incapacitate him. It'd simply help put all of Giorno's friends and partners in one place.
Izuru would see if Giorno could defy destiny, or if he was simply like everyone else.

---

Mitarai's blood ran cold when he acknowledged Giorno again.

"Ryota... you have a Stand?" Giorno stared at Virtual Insanity and wasn't even trying to hide his surprise.

Mitarai and Giorno were standing in the now-ruined Senate assembly while Sonia rested against the left wall with a vacant expression in her eyes. She was doing as commanded after she was affected by the images Mitarai had shown her. Nothing too complex that would interfere with the Despair program that Dio made, but enough that she'd follow orders given.

The problem was that the only way he could use that technique was with his Stand. He had to do it fast as well.

Giorno wasn't his usual self. The sight of Fugo losing against Sonia and Koizumi was enough to make him jump into the fray, and he managed to avoid getting caught by Into The Lens. But there were still problems.

His heart was weakened and divided against itself. The sheer confidence and certainty he had was gone and replaced by doubt. Unable to tell if his fight actually meant anything or if he was merely somehow following the plans of another. Whether he was in control or not.

It meant he wasn't entirely focusing on not getting caught in Ballroom Blitz's range and in keeping Fugo from being caught by Koizumi. A brief glance in the wrong direction, follow by a flash, and the loyal follower was pulled into the world of the photograph. He barely got a scream out.

The leader of Passione found his rage after that, but not his normal rage. This anger was chaotic and made him reckless. He went straight for the Stand Arrow and didn't even realise that he had just led the Queen of Novoselic straight to Mr. President.

Mitarai had stayed hidden under one of the desks by Giorno's orders. It was a fight the animator could easily win- especially when they were this deep into the building- but he stayed out. No one could know his secrets at any cost!

That's what he told himself until Sonia finally got a hit in. Koizumi had announced she was going to the Colosseum, Giorno tried to go after her, and then he was struck by Ballroom Blitz. He collapsed to the ground when he finally touched her and she was talking about using the Stand Arrow and him to create what she thought Dio wanted. All these horrible things about how he'd learn to be the new Dio and to simply let her take charge until then.

It was when she offered to be his Queen, in bed as well as leadership, that Mitarai finally leapt up and unleashed Virtual Insanity.

So here they were. Both of them looking at one another and one looking for answers that the other wanted to give; if only the former would understand.
"I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you a lot of things." Mitarai said quietly. He self-consciously grabbed at his left arm and added a bit more volume. "Maybe we should have that talk now. I can explain everything!"

Giorno once said he regretted never getting Bruno Bucciarati's ability to 'taste' a liar. Mitarai didn't know if that would have made this easier or harder. There were truths he wanted to say, and yet he feared what Giorno would do when he heard them.

But this had to happen! Giorno had to be brought out of this depression and understand just how special he really was!

*He has to know. He has to know that Dio only wanted the best for him. If he had survived at Hope's Peak, he would have come for you, Giorno! This was all because he wanted you to decide your fate!* Mitarai could help Giorno realise his purpose. Realise that he and Dio weren't so different in wanting to create a better world.

"First, Giorno, you do matter! No matter that you think, you're still the man who saved Italy from Diavolo. You ended Despair in Italy. That's why," Mitarai's voice wobbled. It should have been Dio here saying this to his son! "I don't want to see you like this. Trapped in doubt and losing everything that made you so special. I don't know what you think happened, but it doesn't matter! You're still Giorno Giovanna."

Giorno was just standing there silently. His eyes pierced through Mitarai and he didn't move a single inch. Mitarai had no way to tell if Giorno was having a mental battle or if he was just processing his words. Passione's Boss never really gave much with his facial expressions. There were so many ways he was like Dio and yet so many ways he wasn't.

He was Hope, but a different kind. One that could be convinced about the need to reach Heaven and how this required hard choices. The Remnants of Despair would be blunt, but still useful for the cause!

It was when Giorno turned to Sonia that Mitarai finally heard a reply, "Sonia, lick Mitarai's shoes clean."

The Queen immediately left her spot and walked straight towards Mitarai, who was too shocked by Giorno's command to react. The brainwashing worked by obeying orders given- although prioritising Mitarai's above all- and it meant Sonia did not protest even as she fell on her knees, bowed her head, and stuck out her tongue centimetres from his shoes and-

"Wha-Stop!" Mitarai stumbled back as if her tongue was coated in acid. He sighed in relief when he saw her pull back her tongue, before turning to his friend. "Giorno, what are you-"

Mitarai felt Giorno place a firm grip on his shoulder. His eyes held a lot of emotions all fighting with each other, but this time calm had won out.

"I do not know much, that has been made apparent. I do not know if I, a clone of Dio Brando, am truly ever capable of making choices. Perhaps I am, but I can no longer see it because of the doubt in my mind." Giorno tightened his grip and pulled Mitarai in closer, the latter only now realising that he had still been crying, and said, "But I do believe one thing. You are a good person. A bit soft and unwilling to see dark truths, but good nonetheless. At least, that is what I think."

"And it's true. You are a good person too! You're right because you know, deep down, that you're
right. That's what someone close to me said a long time ago, and now I'll say it to you. As many times as you need until you can say it yourself." Mitarai always said it to himself when he was at his lowest. When he doubted in Dio, he said it and his spirits lifted.

The least he could do was do the same for Giorno.

Whatever impact his words had, it was hard to tell. Especially when Giorno let go of Mitarai and walked forward, passing Mitarai, and heading straight for the door on top of the steps. He was obviously heading to follow Koizumi to the Colosseum to fight her and the other Remnants.

He was going to burn his bridges before he even realised the truth!

Mitarai acted quickly to try and stop him, shouting out, "Wait! I know this sounds strange, but I'd like to ask you for two things. Don't mention my Stand to anyone- not until I feel ready to explain it to them- and please don't go yet. I'll tell you the story about my Stand but it has to be now! It's selfish and it's stupid, but you have to trust me on this."

Here it was. The crossroads that only Giorno Giovanna could decide.

One road had Giorno stay and let Mitarai explain the truth about Dio and how he planned for Giorno to decide his own path. About the better world that he and Dio wanted to create and that it could still be in their grasp. The other path was Giorno going forward and fighting with the Remnants, leaving Mitarai alone to hope that he'd make the right choice.

Would he choose to be a Gang-Star only, or would he achieve his destiny and become Emperor; the one who would help mankind reach Heaven?

Giorno stood on the steps and both men stayed silent until he said, "I will respect the fact that you wish this to be a secret. Maybe it is from memories of being a clone, but a Stand Arrow is not the only way to attain one. As well, there may be more than the Arrows that archaeology dig found." Mitarai dared to dream when it came crashing down on him. "That is why I must leave now. Control her for as long as possible while I round them up." He said, pointing at Sonia.

Mitarai made a mental note to have her fall back to Novoselic and order her soldiers to follow her. No need to risk her, or any more innocent civilians, harm.

"Be careful." He said instinctively. It was obvious he didn't just mean for Giorno. He knew what the Gang-Star was capable of. "They were my classmates once. If I can ask one thing-"

"I won't kill them. As long as they learn one simple lesson." Giorno took the final steps up and turned back to Mitarai. The look in his eyes was the kind of certainty he had only ever seen in Dio's eyes. Now they were his son's eyes. "Giorno Giovanna does not appreciate intruders in his home."

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They said that the heat sometimes made you see things. Crazy things that you'd never imagine.

They said the same about stress. When you had, say, nails pierced through your palms, a cannibal tell you how you were to be tortured in front of millions watching worldwide, and a very unsettling tall man who looked eerily similar to you talk about you being reborn, it could mess with you. Make you
see stuff you'd never think could be.

For example, Naegi was pinned down to some kind of cross, feet still firmly planted on the ground, and was seeing eleven identical riders all fighting with the Remnants. With them was Mountain Tim somehow merging into rope and laughing at Souda's frustrations.

Monaca was pinching him hard every ten seconds, on the skin next to the eye, so Naegi knew he wasn't dreaming.

"What the hell is this!! You two get back in range so I can turn you into the kind of crap I flush down the toilet!!! Or hole, technically!!"

"Waaa! I almost got one of those riders from behind when he turned and shot me! It was like he saw me coming!"

" Damnit! Welcome To The Machine almost had him before he turned into fucking rope!"

It was strange. The Remnants of Despair were feared not just because of their bloodthirsty nature, but also because it was incomprehensible how they killed you. An invisible and unknown force gave them the power to torment everyone around them. To break their comprehension as well as their spirit.

Now it was their turn to be attacked by the unknown. Their turn to see their desires turn to nothing because of circumstances they couldn't imagine.

Naegi was sure now that they were not in control; that they were victims of Dio's manipulations like the rest of the world. It didn't mean a small amount of justice for their victims wasn't being served. Nor that he wasn't relieved about the fact that his friends came back for him.

He could see Johnny fighting out with Ibuki. She unleashed everything she had with Feel The Noize, unleashing sound-waves as big as a horse before going for something subtler. She lowered the pitch so that it wouldn't be seen and she'd do harm to the body itself. All to make him stop talking.

Johnny wouldn't stop. He dashed and leapt and even threw a few attacks of his own using Tusk and wouldn't let up. Each and every attack he hammered in the point that should have been obvious to anyone not infected with Despair. That their veneration of Jonathan Joestar made no sense with worshipping Dio Brando.

Did they really believe that he'd want this? That he was happy about Dio killing him?

Ibuki didn't take those kind of questions well. She immediately played her guitar at full-volume for no purpose other than to block out Johnny's words. At first, she tried singing one of her songs as always, but she started getting mad. Mad that her attacks were growing erratic, that none of them were hitting Johnny, and, worst of all, she looked like she knew what he was saying.

She knew the truth and wanted nothing more than to pretend it wasn't there.

"LALALA! Ibuki can't hear you! She's busy playing this sweet melody about how cool the real JoJo was, how shitty you are, and the fact that he and Lord Dio are best friends! Oh JoJo! How you SACRIFICED YOURSELF to show us Despair!" Ibuki screamed furiously, unleashing everything she had on Johnny and Slow Dancer.
"I told you once, I told you twice, I'll tell you a million goddamn times!" Johnny positioned his thumb straight at Ibuki and screamed, "Jonathan would have never wanted this!"

The nail shot forward and skimmed over Ibuki's sound-wave, barely shaking its trajectory, before it impacted on the guitar. It never stood a chance against Tusk Act 3 and the instrument burst into nothing. She was still playing for a few seconds as if it were still in her hands, before she realised that it was gone.

Ibuki stopped trying to fight and threw her hands over her ears, letting out a piercing scream that made Naegi wish he could cover his ears. Monaca was doing it, but the nails wouldn't let him do the same for himself.

Johnny jumped off from Slow Dancer and crashed into Ibuki. The two stumbled towards Naegi before they found their footing; Johnny shoving his right forearm against Ibuki's throat and the Ultimate Light Musician not even trying to escape.

"Say it. I want you to say it." He growled. Ibuki said nothing, and he punched her left cheek. "Come on! You were happy talking shit! Now you get to scream it!"

"No! Ibuki won't! Ibuki's not betraying Lord Dio and JoJo's friendship!" Ibuki screamed. She tried to cover her ears again and Johnny trapped her arms with his own.

"Say it! Tell me just exactly what Jonathan said when he was dying then? Tell me how he was talking about how great Dio was and that they were best friends! Was that how he died? Did he and Dio shake hands over it?! Say it then! How did my brother die?!"

Ibuki didn't say anything, Johnny pulling back his fist to give another punch, when she finally cracked.

"HE KILLED HIM!" She screamed, her voice choked and fighting against the sounds of battle nearby.

Ibuki Mioda changed. Naegi knew she was a high-energy girl. The few pictures that survived Hope's Peak and the Tragedy showed her having fun with her friends, and even the butchery she partook in as an Ultimate Despair, all showed her having fun. A giant smile on her smile and showing infectious excitement.

Not anymore. The guitarist before him looked as if saying those words had sucked the energy out from her. It was pooling away and each second made her look more like the empty husk that she was. Her cheeks were already getting drenched in tears and her eyes flickered for just a moment. They were still red, but there was no light or shine behind them. Just an empty void to match the still girl.

Her voice lost all of its energy as she confessed, almost too quiet if the wind didn't carry her words, "L-Lor-Lord Dio-to m-make us despair....he erased him." Ibuki was speaking through her tears. "Holy Diver's third power. He then smashed through Chiaki-chan's chest like she was nothing...everyone fell into despair."

Johnny put a hand over his face to hide his own tears. "Damnit..." Naegi wanted to reach out when Johnny glared down at the musician. "Get up and I break your skull." He warned, using a hand to
call over Slow Dancer.

"Don't worry...I don't see the fucking point." Ibuki said. She laid there with her arms and legs stretched out while Johnny was getting back on Slow Dancer. "Lord Dio is my God- he blessed me with the chance to worship him in more ways than just my music- but he also killed JoJo. I'm nothing more than a slave. Just some dumb bitch who thought she could be the next Hendrix, then tried to make everyone like her, but it's worthless. All I do is play loud music, scream, and be dumb." She laughed. Or rather, she gave out an empty noise that resembled a soft chuckle. "Guess that's why I bought into my own shit for so long."

Naegi wanted to say something to her. She was so close to breaking free and a single Hope Bullet from Livin' On A Prayer could save her and help him prove the truth about the Remnants of Despair. It wasn't like that Komaeda guy was around to stop him, or get weird about making him 'strong Hope'. The only problem was Monaca.

Would she use She Sells Sanctuary if he tried to escape? He turned to find a sharp smile that didn't belong on a child's face.

"I won't hurt you. Not while he's around." She said, motioning her head at Johnny. The smile widened until it cut her face in half and she leaned in close enough that he could smell her breath. "I'll wait until you're in a more pitiful state. Then we can have fun!"

"Shut it." Johnny rode to Naegi's side and looked him right in the eye. "Naegi, I'm gonna come out and say it. I'm an asshole and any and all insults and punches to the face after this are totally fair game. I'd just like to point out the fact that we're in a war-zone and should probably get the hell out before doing anything."

"Johnny, that's the smartest thing I've heard you say this entire trip." Naegi smiled, before looking behind his saviour, expecting a certain friend of his. "Is Journey-"

"Yeah. He's fine, but still spoiled as hell."

Johnny helped Naegi get the nails out from his palms. It somehow hurt even worse than when they were hammered in, but Livin' On A Prayer managed to heal them enough that it didn't sting for too long. He was lucky that they were thin and long rather than thick and short. That'd have been hard to heal.

Naegi managed to climb onto Slow Dancer just behind Johnny and he warned, "We need to get going. Tanaka's not the only dangerous one. There's also Nagito Komaeda; the one who has Get Lucky. Togami probably told you enough to know he's bad news."

"Your number one fan, I heard." Johnny said almost teasingly.

"Shut up." Naegi replied. It felt good to feel like laughing again.

"It'll be you who shuts up, Makoto Naegi." A dark and booming voice declared. Naegi and Johnny both turning to see who had just spoken, even when they knew who it was.

A pitch-black cape billowed against the wind and contrasted with the dirty drags and bandages that almost served as a straitjacket. Blood-red eyes stared at the two of them, almost into their very souls, and he was already raising his arms to reveal large talons bursting from where his fingernails should be. The scarf around the lower-half of his face did nothing to conceal his voice.
Gundham Tanaka wasn't going to let them go that easily.

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Kirigiri wondered if the relief she felt earlier should have been dread, no matter what side Giorno chose.

The Remnants of Despair, both injured and uninjured, lurked around the front seats of the Colosseum, acting as an audience for the battle they had just witnessed. No, to call it a battle would give it too much credit. This lasted but a handful of seconds when the two giants faced off and the victor was obvious.

Giorno Giovanna was the Heir, the man who would be their new Ultimate Master, if they had their way, but this was Izuru Kamukura. His Boulevard of Broken Dreams could copy any Stand he or its fractured-glass witnessed the effects of. Surely not even Gold Experience could stand up to such a powerful force?

Yet here they were.

The fearsome monsters who destroyed the world had changed. They were now a group of cowards hiding away- not even daring to touch Kirigiri and Asahina's weakened forms just behind Giorno- as they realised who they were dealing with. First, they thought he was nothing more than some mob-boss with a Stand, then he was the new Dio.

Now? Now he was Giorno Giovanna and he was furious.

Kamukura remained on his knees, staring into extended palms, and could not hide the amazement on his face. Boulevard of Broken Dreams was back in its original form and looked nothing like the glowing golden figure that utterly crushed it.

Gold Experience Requiem only needed a single blow to sentence Izuru Kamukura to eternal death. The fate Giorno proclaimed he delivered onto the former boss of Passione.

"I hate it when I have to repeat myself. It means that I'm either speaking to idiots, or people who don't listen," Giorno's voice dropped and Kirigiri could feel the threat pouring out from him. "Get the fuck out of my country, unless you want to experience death without end." He promised.

"So this is Requiem's power." Kamukura said to himself, his voice barely heard over the wind. "The power I cannot achieve."

"A creature like you will never see true power. A being that only seeks to be interested without reason does not know courage." Giorno replied, before looking up to the Remnants. "I am Giorno Giovanna. The leader of Passione, the protector of Italy, and the man who will end you if you don't get the message. Who my father is does not matter. You are not welcome here and neither are your minions."

"You found out...and you still helped us..." Kirigiri said, finally getting her wind back. Tsumiki's Voodoo had almost killed her until she discovered its hidden weakness. "I underestimated you."
Fugo stepped forward and gave a middle finger to the Remnants, having escaped Into The Lens, and screamed, "Yeah! Take your damn drugs, guns, and men and get the hell out!"

The Remnants looked at one another and seemed to be quietly discussing the idea with themselves. Pekoyama was still nursing the wound on her right hand, the situation serious enough that Kuzuryuu didn't dare transfer his own to her. The sound of harsh whispering grew louder until there was a sharp silence.

Tsumiki, even with the bruise on her right eye, burst into tears which Kirigiri took as a good sign. It was obvious that they would accept the command, after seeing what happened to Kamukura.

They may have yearned to feel Despair and to feel the dominance of Dio Brando; but they still had logic. The concept of dying in an infinite loop for all time was nothing short of a nightmare. The rush of despair from death would only be temporary compared to an eternity of suffering.

Maybe that was why the Remnants fled as quickly as they did. Kirigiri noted that they didn't even try to save the Queen of Novoselic, although the lack of explosive sounds from afar suggested that she might have fled earlier. Fugo did say that she and Giorno had been fighting earlier, to Mista's frustration.

He didn't complain for too long, although that was more due to the busted rib.

Not even a few seconds later and Mitarai could be heard heavily panting and running downs the steps of the Colosseum. The Ultimate Animator had arrived just slightly too late to see anything but it was for the best. He wouldn't have coped well in this fight.

The look on his face, however, was one of panic, clearly fearing the worse.

All those emotions melted away when Giorno turned and looked at him impassively.

"You were right, Ryota Mitarai," Giorno said. "I am in control of my destiny. The chains of the past will not keep me bound to a single spot. My choices are my own and I will not let the hunger of my father define me."

So this was what it meant to be a 'Gang-Star'. Kirigiri had thought he simply looked for a way to define himself as something other than a gangster, but this was different. His eyes no longer held the endless hunger for more, nor the ambition to become the master of all he saw.

What she could see was the face of a man who wanted to protect his country and to ensure that the Tragedy never happened again. A man who would retreat back into the shadows as a mobster when this was done. A man who had surrendered the title of Emperor.

But still, there was that flash of ambition. The desire to, while not be Emperor, still reign on the top of the mountain as the crime-boss of Italy.

Kirigiri didn't like him remaining a criminal, when all this was over, but she'd take what she could get.

Giorno had joined the side of Hope, after all.
"Ah! Isn't this a wonderful Miracle?" Komaeda cackled as he saw his now-missing left hand hit Johnny's leg. His other arm wrapped itself around Tanaka's neck, as the Ultimate Breeder dashed with the legs of an ostrich. "Tusk Act 4 was going to forever trap me in a spiral, but Lord Dio's hand saved me! Now it's going to send you to a fate worse than non-existence! Dio Brando kills another Joestar! Naegi, remember this Despair! You'll overcome that too."

"Silence yourself! Lesser Joestar! This is the price you pay for aiding the Ultimate Hope!" Tanaka barked, the two slowly closing the distance between themselves and their two victims.

It'd been so easy to get Naegi on Journey and for the two to start fleeing. Johnny even thought that Tanaka would have given up once he realised how far away he was getting from the others. They were already starting to retreat from Death Valley. He even thought maybe they'd actually make it through this.

Until Komaeda emerged, leapt onto Tanaka's back, and each one acted like the other's motivator. It didn't matter how far Johnny and Naegi got, so long as Tanaka could get closer.

Johnny had only just unlocked Act 4 and now it was going to kill him! How could a hand have been flung at such speed that it'd have hit him in the right leg?

A Miracle, that's how.

He could feel the infinite spin of the Golden Rectangle wrench him towards the point of impact. If he wasn't on Slow Dancer, who was panicking to all hell, he'd have been stuck on the ground and would be doomed. The horse was barely managing to keep pace as its rider was falling out of the saddle.

*I have to stop it! How?! There's got to be a- Johnny thought of something. It was crazy and stupid, but it was all he had left. If you had to stop one unstoppable force, then why not use another? Maybe if I-

Fate had turned against him in that very moment. Slow Dancer must have stumbled on a stray pebble or from the force of Act 4 because it started to slow and shake itself. The survival instinct was overriding its attachments and it tried to free itself from what probably seemed like doom.

Johnny was still attached enough to the saddle that he wasn't thrown to the ground. Instead, he dangled from his right side, facing Naegi, and he was dangerously close to the ground. He didn't dare turn his head to see how close Tanaka and Komaeda were to them, and instead focused on trying to get back on Slow Dancer.

If he didn't get enough speed in time, he'd be dead!

Of course, then, he'd hit his head against the ground. Even at Slow Dancer's reduced speed, Johnny felt the top side of his head crack open and blood began to pour out. The ground itself was stained in red as the chase continued and Johnny's vision began to get blurry.

If he didn't get a concussion from that, maybe he was the real Ultimate Luckster.

Naegi reached out one hand and screamed, "Johnny! I'll hold them o-" He stopped and swallowed. *Livin' On A Prayer held back its Hope Bullets. "You have to calm down! Focus on getting back on Slow Dancer! We're still outpacing them!"
Individual Hope Bullets shot out from Livin' On A Prayer's fingers, one for each sentence, and they landed right where Johnny hit his head. The ex-jockey managed to pull himself up enough that he wasn't hitting the ground anymore and felt his wounds close. Yeah, he could do this.

But how to pick up speed? Act 4 was pulling him in closer and closer and he couldn't fight it for much longer-

Naegi was screaming at the top of his lungs now, whilst darkness danced around the ends of Johnny's vision. "Remember Johnny! Remember everything that's happened! Meeting us, meeting Gyro, fighting against the Remnants, discovering Tusk, and discovering yourself! A Stand is a reflection of the spirit, right? It couldn't have become something this strong unless you've grown as well! If Jonathan was here now, things would be different. But he's not! I'm here, and you're here, and that's what I'm going to say..."

Livin' On A Prayer clapped its hands together and the barrels at the end of the fingers joined together. A large Hope Bullet was coming. If the smaller ones were regular-sizes, this was the size of an RPG round. It emerged from the combined barrels and aimed straight at Johnny. He just managed to read the words inscribed along the Hope Bullet.

"You can move forward from this!" Naegi's words matched the one from the Hope Bullet.

At Slow Dancer and Journey's speeds, it didn't stop the Hope Bullet from crashing into Johnny and coating him in white energy. It called upon the determination in his heart and strengthened it until it was a roaring inferno, extinguishing the doubt and fear holding him back.

Johnny had years of experience in riding horses behind him as he timed his movement. When Slow Dancer's hoofs hit the ground and were about to lift off, Johnny used that moment of push to lift himself up and use the force to take him all the way. Despite Act 4, he managed to get himself back on the saddle fully.

He placed a hand on Slow Dancer's side and timed his breathing with the horse's. It was panicking because it didn't know what was happening to its rider. He had to make it see that only he and it working together would save them.

Whispering in its ear, he said, "Come on, Slow Dancer. We're not letting some marshmallow-haired shit beat us now."

The old bastard actually liked those words. It stopped jumping left to right and began riding forwards again, galloping straight on ahead and getting back into the proper speed. The speed he'd need to time and direct the Spin just right. It'd be harder than before, now that the target was himself.

His right index finger aimed straight for the wound and the Golden Rectangle was forming in his eyes just as Act 4 was pulling him in further. Any second would be the moment where he would be doomed forever!

"Tusk Act 4!" The nail shot from his hand and crashed against the first infinite Spin. The two collided just as Johnny heard Tanaka's frantic breathes closing in on them.

The infinite Spin was unstoppable on its own. Nothing but itself could stop it. The two Spins were the reverse of the other and clashed together, two endless cycles testing whether the other was truly infinite. They had that to stop an oncoming force, you needed something of equal or greater force to
meet it.

What else could stop infinity, but infinity?

Johnny's leg was freed from the curse of Act 4 and Tanaka's pace was already slowing. Johnny turned to Naegi and both men nodded, knowing that the 'fight' had ended. Slow Dancer and Journey were slowed to a stop, if still keeping distance, and Johnny could already see the mad glee in Komaeda's eyes and the despair in Tanaka's. Not the kind of despair he revelled in either, but one much colder that resembled Ibuki's.

"I...He beat a Miracle." Komaeda said. He wrapped his arms around himself, the bleeding stump staining his clothes, and cried out, "Jonathan's brother and Makoto Naegi defeated a Miracle with their Hope!"

"Impossible..." Tanaka collapsed onto his knees and stared into his palms, dropping a wheezing Komaeda onto the floor. Johnny could already see the tears in his eyes. "JoJo couldn't even defeat those odds, and yet they did? How? How? How?" He asked, lost and confused.

"It's because we didn't give in." Johnny glared at Tanaka and decided to try one more time to get it through their thick skulls. "Jonathan wouldn't be ashamed that you cracked. He'd be ashamed that you're trying to justify it by pretending he'd give his life for a monster's ego."

"Aaah, so this is how Despair-"

"And you," Johnny turned his attention to Komaeda and said, "It wasn't because of Hope- or whatever you think Hope is. There was some cosmic force helping us out. It's because we had reasons to fight and survive. Not just because we gave up our identities. We have people waiting at home hoping for us to come back. I'm not gonna leave George and Erina alone to die to some psychopaths who only know how to worship Dio."

With that, knowing that they lost the will to fight, Johnny focused on what came next.

Gyro and Togami had told Johnny to make sure that Naegi was safe before coming back for them. It wasn't like they were having a hard time, with Mountain Tim and the Eleven Riders helping them. Now that they had the numbers and surprise advantage, victory was drawing closer.

Nothing left to do but head for the rendezvous and wait for the others to get back. It was just a few more miles west and then they'd be in California for Johnny to prove his brother's innocence. To finally cut Dio's poison off from the Joestar name.

The Remnants of Despair hadn't just been defeated physically, but spiritually. Johnny proved himself to be Jonathan's brother and that made his rejection of them all the worse. Tanaka looked nothing like a fearsome beast and more a lost and lonely child.

Naegi might have even said something to him, if it weren't for Komaeda's deceptively vacant-looking grin at the two of them. No, that guy still had a Tragedy to come and Johnny didn't trust that guy's luck not to screw them. Better they accept what they had and fight another day.

As the afternoon sun glared down at Death Valley, Makoto Naegi and Jorge 'Johnny' Joestar rode forward to the place where they'd meet their friends and allies. They rode away from the war, carnage, and despair behind them.
They rode to safety.

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It was a bright morning by the docks of Rome where a lone ship owned by the Future Foundation was readying to pick up its ambassadors to Passione. It wasn't anything impressive, but it was certainly suited to fight off an ambush. The disintegration of Ultimate Despair into the Remnants hadn't stopped some fools from trying to win every skirmish they could.

Not that those were likely in the Mediterranean. Even under Diavolo, the seas were safe around Italy, if ruled by a tyrant.

It was a good sign of trust that the Future Foundation were sending a boat now, at least. They trusted Giorno to not intern their ships or have it investigated. Not after the rumours of how he fought off half of the former Class 77-B, the vanguards of the Tragedy.

There were two sides by the docks, each facing the other, as the leaders of Passione agreed to see off the delegates from the Future Foundation. On the one side from left to right were Trish Una, Guido Mista, Giorno Giovanna, Pannacotta Fugo, and Sheila E, and on the other was Asahina, Kirigiri, and Mitarai.

"I'm guessing this is your final offer?" Kirigiri asked, looking over the document that Giorno had given her. Despite her level tone, and choice of words, Giorno knew she wasn't unhappy.

"The Future Foundation will not control Italy. Passione liberated this land and I will decide how things operation. If they do not wish to cooperate on those terms, then that is their own decision." Giorno replied, before continuing. "However, perhaps there is a need for those more equipped with the Remnants'...tendencies to have a presence here."

He had readied the offer with that in mind. It was true that the threat of Gold Experience Requiem would keep the Remnants of Despair far away from Italy, both in their physical presence and the smuggling of drugs and guns. He could possibly keep Italy stable.

But what about Europe? He could not be in all places at once and the Remnants would not stick around. Italy wasn't ready to invade Novoselic and it was barely keeping the peace on its own. It wasn't as if Valentine would send help, not without strings.

A deal with the Future Foundation would give him what he needed. Giorno could not let himself fall into his ambitions and become some kind of new Ultimate Master. An emperor of the world would be what his father wanted. Instead, he would do his part to help heal the world.

That didn't mean there weren't conditions.

"You want to join the Future Foundation?! As the 13th Branch Head?! Immediately?!" Mitarai couldn't contain his shock as he read through the papers over Kirigiri's shoulder. Giorno resisted the urge to scold him for repeating what was said on the paper.

He didn't look like he had enough sleep last night...more than usual, anyway.

"I will naturally maintain control of Italy, but will go no further, and I have a voice in certain
operations. In exchange, I renounce any involvement in political affairs and promise to restrict Passione operations to Italy," Giorno narrowed his eyes. "Until the crisis has passed."

He kept himself from softly laughing at the annoyed expression on Kirigiri's face. Either she had started slipping, or she was letting her defences down.

Asahina looked inquisitive. "Does that make you my boss now?" She asked, before her smile somehow brightened even more and she ran to grab Trish's hands. "We can be co-workers, Trish! We can go out together, we can see movies, go swimming, oh there's a great place where Osaka's being rebuilt where they make the best doughnuts and-

"That's if the Future Foundation accepts the deal. Otherwise, we might have problems." Mista replied gruffly. Giorno did appreciate his willingness to play 'bad cop'.

"Mista!" Trish scolded, before turning back to Asahina. "But yeah, your bosses are gonna have to decide if this is going to work."

"The recommendation of two Branch Heads should be enough. As will the reports of Giorno Giovanna fighting off an attack by multiple Remnants within Rome itself." Kirigiri frowned and put a hand to her chin in thought. "It will be a close vote. Munakata, Sakakura, Yukizome, Kimura, all of them vote as a bloc. Andou and Izayoi aren't fond of new people either, and could vote against you."

"But the Chairman will support you! I know he's more trusting than Munakata, and definitely will see that you're on the side of Hope. Maybe I can convince Miss Yukizome too!" Mitarai offered, his eyes burning with determination.

"Ryota, I know I can count on you." Giorno smirked as he said, "Simply ask Munakata why he wishes to side against those fighting against Despair. Or if he has ambitions for the Arrow rather than Hope."

"I'll go with a more diplomatic slant on those words." Kirigiri still smiled. "Goodbye, Giorno. It's been a unique experience meeting with you."

The three of them went up the plank towards the boat and waved goodbye from there. Kirigiri gave a quick wave before heading inside, Mitarai softly waved at Giorno while lingering, and Asahina was throwing her hand in the air even as the boat began to set sail, disappearing from sight.

Giorno and the others waved as well, although Asahina's enthusiasm did force them to keep waving despite the ache in their arms. Mista was the first to break, mostly because of his injury and everyone complaining about having to smell him, and Sheila and Fugo gave up next. Trish was clearly trying to not accidentally hurt Asahina's feelings.

Everyone was rubbing their arms once the boat was finally out of sight.

"What do we do now?" Fugo asked, speaking as the soon to be newest under-boss of Passione.

"Let's check up on those Future Foundation outposts," Giorno replied. He didn't know if Kirigiri really thought they were secret to him or not. "If Munakata has his way, maybe a friendly message will push him to reconsider."

As to what he'd do if Munakata had the Future Foundation reject his offer, even Giorno didn't know.
At worst, they'd be made to leave with their files and secrets known to him. There would be no war, especially if the offer was accepted and they answered to him instead.

There was no reason for the forces of good to bicker while the legacy of his father still haunted them all. He was not only going to refuse the fate his father wished for him, but he would destroy it as well.

_Father, I wonder if you thought I would make this land my empire. If I would be a man like Diavolo._ Giorno looked at the bright blue sky that he remembered Bruno promising to return to Italy. Back in the days where the heavens bled and the clouds were dark as night. _I have struggled with fate before and won. Yours is no different. I will not be a new Ultimate Master. I will be a man who lives by my own code. A Gang-Star creating where you only destroyed._

Giorno would not let the past bind him down. He, and those he called comrades and friends, rejected that fate and chose a path of their own. Not the path of a conqueror.

The path of freedom.

---

Johnny and Gyro leaned against the railing and watched as the dot in the distance became nothing. It was still early morning but they had just enough sun to be able to see the ship off. That, and Naegi vomiting off the side of the boat from sea-sickness.

_He'll get used to it later._ Johnny told himself. The kid- technically only younger by a few weeks- had a knack for adapting to situations he didn't like.

Nothing much else for him and Gyro to do but head back to the only inn in town that let them keep horses in the back and pray the rooms weren't too shabby. They at least had a bathroom, so there was that. Certainly better than their normal sleeping situation for the past month and a half.

After that, well, Johnny hadn't figured out the specifics yet and he guessed that Gyro hadn't either.

"So what do you want to do now?" Gyro asked, making his steel balls dance between his fingers to pass the time. "Italy's apparently been a lot of fun when I left. Remnants tried to take two targets at once and failed at both sides of the Atlantic."

"First, I gotta call Erina and George and tell them I'm fine and walking. That second one's gonna be a lot harder to explain than the first." He looked down and still couldn't believe it. He was walking again. He was still supporting himself with the cane, but he was actually walking!

Two months ago, it was stuff of dreams he wished would never end.

Still, there were other things to think about. Mountain Tim and the Eleven Riders had parted ways with Johnny's group after they confirmed that the Remnants were fleeing the US. They had probably went back to report everything to the President and confirm that Naegi was safe.

It was a short ride then to California, a couple hours finding a place to stay and explaining everything that happened, and Jonathan's story would be heard. The truth of his sacrifice would be known and his name would be cleared. Also they'd reported that Naegi wasn't going to be used as a human
sacrifice by the Remnants of Despair.

Journey and Spandau were heading to the ranch back in Danville; Naegi and Togami promised to visit the Joestars and the horses again. Naegi was bubbling with Journey, and even Togami seemed a little attached to Spandau as well. If Johnny didn't know any better, they were just in it for the horses.

But now they had to go back to the Fourteenth Branch HQ while Johnny and Giorno had to take the horses and themselves home.

"About the journey, some of the trains here can fit the horses, if we call in a few favours. We can take the train with them back to Danville. It'd take a few days and I'm sure Giorno wants to hear my report on how things went on. May prefer it in person." Gyro said with a shrug of his shoulders.

Johnny could tell, by the unenthusiastic tone, how Gyro wanted him to reply, "Or we can take the scenic route?" He asked sarcastically.

"It'd be like the days of the Wild West! For real this time, now that we're free of having to play babysitter and getting away from those psychopaths." Gyro beamed.

"Yeah, now we get to go through all the normal shit that comes with camping and riding out. Sure, I might as well break the new legs while I've got them." Johnny said.

"I'm not hearing a no." Gyro wasn't wrong to say that.

Johnny was pretending to be reluctant but it did appeal to him. He just learnt how to ride again, not to mention now learning how to use a cane, and there was so much that he could have seen and embraced, if it wasn't for the personal drama and the constant chase.

It made the journey thrilling, but there wasn't really ever time to think about what they did. To take in the world around them.

Besides, Johnny felt he at least earned this kind of trip with his friend.

He smirked, "Why the hell not? Might as well grab some souvenirs for George. You sure your Boss will be fine with it?" He didn't want to get Gyro in trouble.

"I get the feeling that the reason he sent me here is about to become moot. Still, I can call him in an hour and explain. He'll understand...hopefully." Gyro laughed to himself and Johnny couldn't help but laugh with him.

The two had just finished an adventure and now they were going on one again. There was stuff they'd have to do first, Johnny calling his family and Gyro his boss, and also getting supplies for the trip, but the worst would be having someone escort Journey and Spandau back to Danville. It was two train rides but horses needed a lot of care.

As for Slow Dancer and Valkyrie, they'd be taking the long road home.

The sounds of the ocean waves crashing against the docks filled the air as Johnny looked at the blue skies above. There were a handful of clouds in the sky and Johnny wondered, just maybe, if someone above was looking down on him.

*Jonathan, there's a lot of things I wish I said when you were alive, and a lot of crap I wish I didn't*
say. That's never gonna change. Johnny thought to himself, praying that his brother could hear him somehow. Even so, he let himself smile. I'm not going to wait anymore. I'm not standing still and I'm not going back. Maybe this is what you thought I could be...a guy who can move forward from the shit hand he got dealt.

He turned back and faced the city, Gyro humming that stupid catchy song to himself as he joined Johnny. It was going to be a long walk back to the inn but Slow Dancer and Valkyrie needed feeding, especially for what they were going to do next. The two riders were going to take the long way back home to where the Joestar family was waiting for them. Erina would be kind-f mad, but once she saw Johnny, with the cane in hand...he had a feeling she wouldn't give a damn about timing.

Either way, he didn't look back.
Alternate Endings

#1

"D-Dio? Are you sure you're good for tomorrow?" Naegi stuttered as he was being gently- okay, not so gently- shoved towards the door. "If Togami shows up-"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, I won't kill him. Promise. Now I'd like some privacy I have to do..." Dio trailed off, trying to think of an excuse. He failed and decided to just give the final shove. "Model things."

With that, Naegi was thrown out the door and it slammed behind him. He barely had time to say anything before noticing Kirigiri staring at him as if a cup of noodles landed on his head or something. He nervously tried to laugh it off, hoping she didn't think he failed or anything.

"Dio said he's fine to meet in the cafeteria tomorrow. Maybe we can get back on track instead of playing Murualsee's game." He said. Kirigiri looked at him and her eyes went to the shut door behind Naegi.

"I don't know why he was so panicked. I guess he really liked the Present I got him from the machine." Naegi shrugged his shoulders. Maybe he thought he could use it as a weapon of some kind.

What's an arrow-head going to do though?

---

"Holy fuck! Oh thank God!" Dio took a deep breath and then exhaled. Again and again for about a minute before regaining his composure. "The odds of him getting this present, and the odds of him giving to I, Dio."

Imagine what would have happened if Naegi hadn't given him the Stand Arrow.

"First things first, I am totally going to break the shit out of their hope later."

#2

Oogami laid the finishing blow to Dio's chest. The battle had been long and hard, but the survivors of this sick game were finally gaining the upper-hand. Togami with the Berserker Armour and the Muramasa blade and Sakura Oogami's skill as the Ultimate Fighter were overcoming Dio's ferocity
and dirty-tricks. Murralsee itself was being fended off by Genocider Syo's mastery of scissors.

Dio flew towards the throne that Murralsee sat upon when sentencing their friends to their Execution. Once a mighty throne had become no more than a damaged chair as Dio's back slammed against the wood, making the entire thing shake. It was almost as if something else was touching it.

The 'Ultimate Master' spat at his former friends, "You think you have won? I will never be defeated! This world burned by the will of Dio and so will-"

"Secure the kill!" Hagakure's scream cut off Togami's advance behind the throne. The fortune-teller stood by Oogami's side and let loose before anyone could notice.

Dio barely had time to react before blood poured from his mouth and he desperately grabbed at the side of his neck. Anything to try and stem the bleeding but, to the survivors fighting against him, he stopped from shock and laid against the throne.

The arrow remained wedged in his neck.

"I did it! I saved us all!" Hagakure cheered. Outside of Hope's Peak, literally everyone but people who could see Stands did the same.

"You dumb piece of shit." Murralsee said, speaking for everyone who could.

"What?"

If Hagakure could see Stands, which he couldn't, he'd have noticed that Holy Diver was screaming at the top of its lung as a bluish energy formed cracked along its skin until it entirely encompassed it. Its body shook and covered its head with its arms until it threw them out and a burst of light came shining out from the Stand and covered the entire room.

Dio then won.

**Dio/Rainbow In The Dark: Just Got Requiem**
**Class 78/No Stands At All: Just Got Fucked**

#3

"I, uh, I didn't think you'd do it so quick." Dio admitted. "No one's mad or feeling betrayed?"

"Why would we?" Naegi asked, from where he knelt. "It's not like we know you. You have us trapped, we want out, so we're acknowledging you as the Ultimate Master and forfeit our Talents."

"I just thought-y'know-you'd wait a round."

"Should we, Dio? Or is it Lord Dio?" Togami asked, at Naegi's immediate right.

"I never knew how much I actually never wanted you to say that. Anyway, I just thought you'd be more like..." Dio trailed off. He didn't think they'd give in the second Murralsee explained the Mutual Killing Game and the demand they submit.

He'd mention their school-memories, but that felt too sappy and probably wouldn't change that much.
This was what he wanted after all.

*Yeah but...I thought it'd be more fun...or at least a challenge.* Dio's disappointment was shared by everyone in the world who wasn't a cultist for him or already broken.

"We can leave now, right?" Kirigiri asked. "We don't mind losing the Talents. Ishimaru's a farmer, Mondo's a carpenter, and Celes can style clothes. Hell, Togami and I are gonna find ourselves by hanging with Hagakure."

"Kiris, no." Dio pleaded. "The outside world's kind of fucked. Like...it's all just wasteland."

"Oh, so that'll be a good chance to work-out." Fujisaki noted. Oogami looked somewhat with envy, although she was already content to train in the mental rather than martial arts. "So can we go now?"

"...I guess. What about your families and friends?"

"They'll be fine." Fukawa scoffed, as everyone else nodded.

The broadcast ended when the rest of Class 78 left Hope's Peak and began walking off to the nearest settlement to begin their new lives. Dio agreed to make them untouchable by his slaves and gave them direction to Towa City; having secured their submission and the end of the old world's last hope. No reason to keep the hostages around either.

Yep. He won. All in a single day.

No murders. No trials. No epic Stand battles. Just fourteen people kneeling on the floor and moving on with their lives.

"Lord Dio, are you content?"

"Shut up, Jin."

Dio, like the rest of the world, was kind of bummed out.

#4

"Okay, everyone, that's the guards taken care of," Mitarai hummed as he strolled back into the conference room. "Quick check. Who wants to help humanity?"

"Lord Dio." The Branch Heads of the Future Foundation, also Naegi and Asahina, chimed simultaneously. Apart from Gekkogahara, as Monaca had already left for space.

"Who are you going to obey?"

"Lord Dio and you, Mitarai."

"Great! Wow, this was so easy." Mitarai just had to activate Virtual Insanity and sent a version of a mind control program before any of them could close their eyes. "Okay, I'm just gonna get Dio a new body. You guys make sure everyone's loyal. Remember, obey all of mine and Dio's commands."
And that was how Mitarai won.

#5

"Because you're Dio's Friend."

Detective Man manifested and threw up its pistol and fired without checking its aim. There was no time to make sure that she would hit the spine; she could already see that the Truth Bullet would only hit him in the leg. At least it would strike him before he could use Virtual Insanity.

Mitarai's eyes, once filled with confidence, revealed horror as he turned and his leg was struck through by Kirigiri's words. It was the last thing she saw before she ran straight at him.

*Keep your eyes shut. Don't let Virtual Insanity trap you. If you can avoid letting him control the 'atmosphere', you can restrain him.* Kirigiri told herself. Mitarai was physically weak and could do nothing as Kirigiri tackled into him.

As they crashed onto the ground, Kirigiri using Mitarai's body to cushion her fall, she grabbed his right arm and twisted it behind his back. She placed a knee on the back of his neck and shoved his chest onto the ground. With her eyes shut, Mitarai's right leg pierced by a Truth Bullet, and a firm grip on his arm, Kirigiri had successfully disarmed Mitarai.

*On the other hand...better safe than sorry.*

Kirigiri used her free hand to then punch Mitarai in the back of head at full-force. His body went lax and Kirigiri could tell that he was fully unconscious.

*Still...*

Double-tap. She punched him again, and then did a full-body search where she discovered the Stand Arrow.

"Forgot about this," Kirigiri mused as she slipped it into her own jacket. "That was a close one. Almost got fucked-up, if that pierced him. Better find Naegi and Asahina."

It was easy to throw Mitarai over her shoulder and then find Naegi and Asahina in time. Gekkogahara- who turned out to be Monaca- tried some shit but she got taken down pretty easily. On the bright side, it gave them tools to restrain Mitarai with, now that they had wires. Now all that was left was dealing with Munakata's making his relationship troubles everyone else's problem.

Kirigiri wasn't gonna lie. This had been a weird day.

#6

"I'm sorry, Dio. I didn't mean to exploit your new body this much." Kotoko muttered, hiding behind Mitarai's right leg.

"It's...ah...okay....Monaca did not...mmm...tell you..." Dio replied, trying to minimise the contact between his clothes and Komaru's skin and failing miserably. "Ryota...you have the sinners..."

"About that...are you sure we need to..."
"Ryota...this body is one porn mag from exploding...oh God....so you get those sinners or you pull down your pants and fuck me." Dio commanded, before letting out either a masculine or feminine moan, depending on which voice you paid attention to.

Maybe he shouldn't have relied on the Warriors of Hope to co-ordinate and think plans through.

#7

"Well, that was a close one. I guess Hope won." Tengan hummed, as armed guards began to restrain Dio's corpse.

"My best friend lied to me for months about his plans, he murdered dozens of people, including one of my classmates in a brutal ceremony, which included lobotomising my teacher, to brainwash my other classmates into a genocidal cult that would destroy the world. I had to brainwash him to stand-down and then make him kill himself. I can never trust anyone again and am filled with so much self-loathing and guilt that the Headmaster's put me on suicide-watch." Mitarai motioned to the straitjacket- he was allowed the mouth-guard's removal when he promised not to bite out his tongue.

"Yes, but now the world isn't destroyed."

Mitarai paused.

He supposed that was a plus.

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**Josuke Hair Insults**

Munakata: "To create a world of Hope, I will destroy all Despair...even in a stupid form like that."

Tengan: "Violence is wrong, for it brings Despair. So it makes sense to get rid of that hair. After all, it's certainly making me feel violent."

Great Gozu: "That kind of hair-style? In this day and age? I get it! You must be the Heel they've sent in. Nice work on the hair; that'll get the crowd pissed."

Bandai: "The hornet's nest shall savage the crops if disturbed."

Ruruka: "I bet you're the kind of guy who thinks the girls give you sweets because you're cool; not because that hair makes you look like those ugly dogs."

Izayoi: "If you think I'll let a delinquent like you get anywhere near Ruruka, well, I guess you'll be getting a hair-cut free of charge."

Seiko: "There's no medicine in the world to fix that terrible hair! Or is there? Maybe if I can make it shed in the proper direction..."

Gekkogahara: "That hair! It's so aggressively lame! It's activating my Battle Mode!"

Kizakura: "What am I looking- God, I gotta quit drinking so much...don't tell Jin I said that."
Jin: "Young man! That haircut may not be against school regulations, but it is most certainly against common sense regulations!"

Unused Stands

**Don't Stop Believin' (Livin' On A Prayer Requiem)**

**User:** Makoto Naegi

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: D
- Speed: B
- Range: A
- Durability: B
- Precision: A
- Developmental Potential: B

**Abilities**

Hope Bullets can now not only reach hearts and minds, but souls as well. Can free souls from alterations and despair. Hope Bullets can also pass through other forms of communication via phone and televised calls/broadcasts. These forms of communication must be live.

Hope Bullets can also create feelings of Hope, if target felt them once but then lost it. User cannot control what the affected does with that 'hope'.

Physical enhancement of others and healing power is strengthened as user is capable of even healing fatal wounds so long as the target is not dead. Requires large amounts of both Hope and emotional connection with the target. Healing own wounds requires Hope alone.

**Hallelujah**

**User:** Izuru Kamukura

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: N/A
- Speed: N/A
- Range: N/A
- Durability: N/A
- Precision: N/A
- Developmental Potential: E

**Abilities**

Stand is unlocked when user completes the ritual to go to Heaven. Takes the form of multiple glass shards with the reflection of every Stand catalogued since Boulevard of Broken Dreams was unlocked.

User is capable of mimicking all Stands witnessed by glass shards and can use multiple Stands at the same time. Glass shards can also become identical copy of a Stand, meaning that the user can not only use multiple different Stands, but also multiple versions of the same Stand. Damage to the Stand in these forms does not reflect back to the user and properties resemble that of an autonomous Stand, if not for following the commands of the user.
User can copy the Stand of all caught in reflections of any glass shard. Even if the target does not have a Stand, or lacks the spirit to control it, the user may still copy the potential Stand and can control it.

**One More Time (Get Lucky Requiem)**

**User:** Nagito Komaeda  
**Stats**  
Destructive Power C  
Speed B  
Range A  
Durability A  
Precision B  
Developmental Potential C

**Abilities**  
Stand takes the form of both Miracle and Tragedy mixing together to form one body. The right side of the face is the silver Tragedy and the left side is the golden Miracle, while One More Time itself had four arms, one pair below the other, and four legs, where the additional two are on the front and back to reflect the left and right legs.

One More Time records moments of great despair in the user's life and labels them 'Tragedies'. Whenever the user suffers bad luck, the Stand will begin to fill, and when it is full, the user will have the power to replace that 'Tragedy' with a 'Miracle' instead. The user will be teleported to that moment in time, however, and have to live in the timeline they just altered. They can only repeat a 'Tragedy' once and a perfect world is not guaranteed.

User will replace the version of them from the past. One More Time will replace Get Lucky, or serve as the Stand if the user at that point in time lacked a Stand, and the user not only retains memories but also 'memories' such as injuries and disease progression. The only thing different is age.

One More Time can use parts of its energy to send back moments of 'good luck' to instances where the user suffered normal or minor despair. The user is pulled back to those moments, but they lack the memories of the original timeline and only have 'flashbacks'. It also drains away from the 'Miracle'.

**Combine Harvester**

**User:** Daisaku Bandai  
**Stats**  
Destructive Power E  
Speed C  
Range E  
Durability E  
Precision D  
Developmental Potential E

**Abilities**  
Stand has the appearance of thin green vines that wrap around the hand to give the appearance of 'green thumb'. Enables crop growth from seed to full plant in perfect ripeness. Seed must be placed in the soil, can only grow to natural size, and must be either directly or indirectly touched by user. The process is not instantaneous.
Mitarai/Tengan: "Chairman, I'll back you up!", "Such a considerate young man, Mitarai...but I'm not as helpless as you think."
Victory: "Kindness is a virtue, Mitarai, but in battles like these, you have to be brutal.", "Yes, Chairman."

Mitarai/Kirigiri: "Kirigiri! I won't let anything happen to you.", "Your concern is unnecessary. I've already planned our path to victory."
Victory: "Your Virtual Insanity is impressive, if limited. But Detective Man had it handled.", "R-Right..."

Mitarai/Monaca: "Monaca, I know I let you down. We still have to work together!", "Tch...fine. Do what you want."
Victory: "It's your fault that Dio's not here anymore. You know that, right?", "I'm reminded of that every single day."

Munakata/Juzo: "Sakakura, this won't be like our usual fights. Do you remember Osaka?", "Got it. Knock You Out can take a hit or two."
Victory: "We won...do you think this'll ever end?", "Munakata, I got faith in you. You're the man that's gonna put this world right again."

Munakata/Yukizome: "Yukizome, stay behind me. It's dangerous.", "Kyosuke, I can't just let you take the lead like that without help!"
Victory: "You didn't need to put yourself in danger like that...but thank you anyway.", "What kind of person would I be if I let you do all the hard work? And why don't you ever call me Chisa?!"

Munakata/Naegi: "Naegi, we'll do things your way for now. Let's see if your Hope can win a battle like this.", "I'll do it. I'll show you that I'm not just platitudes!"
Victory: "Wait! You said we're doing it my way? Then don't kill!", "...that optimism will backfire on you one day."

Munakata/Seiko: "I-I won't let you down!", "Just do your best, Kimura. I trust in your instincts."
Victory: "Your medicine pulled us through. Just as it was in Sendai.", "It's nice to know that I make some difference. I'll repay you for your kindness on that day."

Juzo/Yukizome: "Oi, Yukizome, you know Munakata'll be pissed if you get hurt.", "What Kyosuke doesn't know won't hurt him. Besides, we promised to support him!"
Victory: "See? Teamwork makes the dream work!", "I'm not one of your students. Thanks anyway."

Juzo/Seiko: "Try to keep up, Kimura. Knock You Out's pretty intense.", "Just don't over-exert yourself! It's no point winning this battle if you're injured later."
Victory: "That White Rabbit's pretty amazing. I can see why Munakata wanted you with us.", "It's nothing compared with what you did for me."

Juzo/Jotaro: "You're the back-up? Whatever. Just stay out of my way.", "Good grief, I could say the same to you. I thought you were the Ultimate Boxer."
Victory: "That Stand...it's really fucking strong.", "Knock You Out's not half-bad. When you get pissed, it's got the same strength. Just try to keep a cool head more often."
Dio/UD!Chisa: "Woman, make yourself useful and dispose of these fools.", "Lord Dio, I'll do as you command. Holy Diver can negate any blood on you so it's okay if I play a little rough."
Victory: "Was I of service, Lord Dio? I can be of use in...other ways.", "You accomplished your goal. Now get out of my sight, your wantonness disgusts me."

Ruruka/Izayoi: "Yoi-chan, I need you to protect.", "Never fear. I'll never let you be harmed."
Victory: "As long as we have each other, nothing will hurt us!", "Ruruka, I'll always keep you safe. For love and delicious sweets."

Ruruka/Seiko: "Don't you even think about betraying me again.", "Me betraying you? After what you did?!"
Victory: "It's your fault I was expelled from Hope's Peak!", "You're the one who asked for the drugs because she was lazy!"

Seiko/Izayoi: "Kimura.", "Izayoi."
Victory: "Don't think this makes things okay.", "Go back to your dealer."

Gozu/Nagami: "Naegi, it's good that we can fight together! Just be sure to stay back and provide support.", "I'm not just gonna let you take all the burden!"
Victory: "Gozu, are you alright?! That was amazing! "It's okay. I didn't become the Ultimate Wrestler for nothing. Macho Man will keep Hope safe."

Gozu/Asahina: "Gozu, I've got your back.", "I'd tell you to stay back, but you're not gonna listen. Guess I'll have to bulldoze the enemy instead!"
Victory: "The Ocean really is amazing. Better be careful. No telling who's around the corner."

Kizakura/Kirigiri: "Wait a second, Kirigiri. Maybe a pretty lady like you should let me do the heavy-lifting.", "Patronising flattery will get you nowhere. I am just as prepared as you are for this."
Victory: "Wow. You weren't kidding. With a sharp brain like that with Detective Man, you're nearly unstoppable. You're a real fine woman.", "...I will find out just why you are so interested in me."

Jotaro/Fukawa: "Ah...so I guess we're working together then, huh? Well, I'm not entirely complaining."
"That voice...it sounds like..."
Victory: "Ah! We managed to do it! Jotaro, that Stand of yours is really something else...it makes me want to fall in your arms as you embrace me and we-", "Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP!!!"

PB!Jonathan/Sakura: "What?! That figure...it's like an ogre's!", "That face...it can't be..."
Victory: "It seems I mistook you for someone else. My apologies.", "No, that is alright. I should have remembered to be more of a gentleman!"

Souda/Caesar: "Just 'cause we're working together, doesn't mean I like you! I saw you talking with Miss Sonia!", "What's your problem. Is she your woman?"
Victory: "N-No...well I mean...she did return my smile yesterday. Or she was smiling at Hinata...screw it! It still counts!", "It's not just fighting that you need a wing-man."

Jotaro/HD!Komaeda: "The man who killed Dio...even if it's another world...this is filling me with Hope!", "What the hell is he talking about?"
Victory: "Ah, with Star Platinum, I'm sure there's no Despair you couldn't overcome!", "Give it a rest with that hope and despair shit."

Holy Diver IF
Johnny/Naegi: "Johnny, we're going to have to fight.", "Oh man, and I was so pumped to see you ask them to stop after the hundredth time they try to kill us."
Victory: "You don't have to be so sarcastic. But thanks for having my back.", "No problem. Just don't forget what you mean to people."

Mitarai/Giorno: "Giorno, I know I'm not much, but please let me fight by your side.", "I trust you, Ryota. Let's see what a Branch Head can do!"
Victory: "The power of your Virtual Insanity. It's almost too much.", "It just creates illusions. You? It's like watching the sun all over again."

Giorno/Kirigiri: "It seems we'll be fighting together.", "You sound so inquisitive, Kirigiri. I hope you're not going to use this to find weaknesses."
Victory: "This was easier than I expected. We make a good team.", "His ruthlessness, but without the madness."

Asahina/Trish: "Be careful, Asahina. This could be serious business.", "Got it! But we're totally gonna win!"
Victory: "Called it! I wonder if there are any donuts around here.", "She's so care-free when the fighting's done. Still, I'm not complaining."

Jonathan/Chisa: "Miss Yukizome! Please stand back. I cannot allow a lady to fight in the front-lines.", "Jonathan! A teacher can't just stand back and let her students do all the fighting."
Victory: "Your assistance was appreciated. I had forgotten about your combat skills.", "Just because I'm a girl...though maybe I was being over-protective too. We did win though."

Jonathan/Hinata: "Hajime Hinata? Yes! Chiaki mentioned you. That fire in your eyes is different from what she said.", "I was kind of a loser back then. Let's deal with these guys first."
Victory: "Amazing! I can see how you saved my friends from Despair. I cannot thank you enough for that!", "All I did was create the possibility. It was their memories, with you as well, that gave them the will to make it reality."

Jonathan/Komaeda: "JoJo! The Despair I felt at your death, it's being destroyed by the Hope of seeing you again!", "Nagito...I find it hard to understand you as always."
Victory: "It's okay! Trash like me aren't worth admiration.", "It's not that! But that way of viewing the world...I simply can't accept it!"

Jonathan/Sonia: "Prin-Sonia! It's me, Jonathan!", "JoJo...is that...It's wonderful to see you again!!"
Victory: "That Stand of yours, Sonia, it must have taken a lot of training to use it properly.", "Yes...enough of that. There's plenty of time for that story later. I just want to enjoy this."

Jonathan/Souda: "Holy shit! Ghost!", "No, Kazuichi. It's me! Jonathan!"
Victory: "Y-Y-You're not a ghost...How's it going? How are you-", "It's a complicated story."

Jonathan/Tanaka: "I-I-Impossible! How can an angel visit the realm of the Dark Lord?!", "Hello to you as well, Gundham. Greetings will have to wait until this fight is won!"
Victory: "It's good to see you again. I presume much has happened since we last met.", "...Time means nothing to the Dark Lord! The important thing is that we are re-united again! Light and darkness have resumed their balance!"

Jonathan/Kuzuryuu: "Fuyuhiko, what's wrong? What happened to your-", "It's nothing. Come on, you big softie, time to get your hands dirty."
Victory: "I'm fine, truly. It was just a scratch.", "Yeah, well I'm not taking any chances. Knowing you, there's gonna be a dog kicked somewhere and you end up on a burning boat."

Jonathan/Pekoyama: "JoJo...it's good to see you again. Especially after everything.", "It's good to see you as well. Let's talk more after this battle!"
Victory: "Peko, your swordsmanship has only improved! Your Stand only compliments it further. All of your attacks avoided fatal areas!", "The Young Master and I always talked about never having to kill again. Why not start now?"

Jonathan/Sagishi: "Mitar-I mean Sagishi, is that you? You're wearing a disguise again.", "Let's just say I've had my reasons for staying hidden."
Victory: "Your eyes are hiding something...you can tell me when you're ready.", "It'd just get in the way of the moment. You have no idea how much of a relief it is to see you again."

Jonathan/Akane: "Yo, JoJo! Seeing you again....it's so goddamn awesome. It makes me wanna go all-out!", "Akane, please! It's pleasant to see you too but maybe we should focus on the enemy? Also wear less revealing clothing?"
Victory: "I knew we'd win! It's strange how when things stop sucking, you turn up again.", "It's a surprise for me as well. Not an unpleasant one. That Stand of yours is amazing! To have your body's burning fury match your spirit is astounding!"

Jonathan/Nidai: "JoJo!!! It's great to see you after all this time! Not even death can bring you down! It's time we showed these punks what real men can do!", "That's right! Our spirit will roar and crush through this evil!"
Victory: "Seeing you again is really going to raise everyone's spirits! It's been a long time since we last saw you...", "We can speak of that another day. This time, we should be celebrating! I can't wait to see my friends again!"

Jonathan/Tsumiki: "Mikan, are you alright? I promise, I won't let them hurt you!", "JoJo...is that...really you?"
Victory: "I'm sorry!!! I let you down and I helped Dio and I'm the reason why.-", "I won't let you blame yourself for Dio's sins. You were as much a victim of him as I and Chiaki were. Don't shame yourself for making the same mistake as I did."

Jonathan/Saionji: "Look who decided to show up two years late. What's the matter? Someone put salt in your tea?", "Hiyoko, it's good to see you as well. Your dances seem as elegant as ever.
Victory: "Yeah they're elegant! Now I got Safety Dance too. There's no reason for you to not watch me dance! You hear me? No more disappearing acts!", "I understand...Do you need a tissue? Your face has become wet all of a sudden."

Jonathan/Koizumi: "JoJo? I gotta take a picture! I need to be sure this isn't a trick!", "Mahiru, it's me, I promise. I'm sorry I wasn't there before, but I'm here now to help!
Victory: "Apologising...after all you-Gah! You dumb man!", "Did I say something to-Wait. You're smiling through the tears."

Jonathan/Ibuki: "JOJO!!! Ibuki's so glad to see you again!! This makes her want to write a real rock ballad like no one's ever seen before!", "Perhaps we should wait until this fight is done? Or when you aren't so close to loudspeakers?"
Victory: "Everyone's going to be so glad that you're back! We were in an island simulation, and we met Hinata-chan, and we also met your brother before that and it was weird and there's other stuff too but...", "Maybe the happier stories first. I've heard of how you defeated Dio. That's the important thing."
Jonathan/Hanamura: "Teruteru, are you...crying?", "I just can't help myself! The emotions inside me are bubbling and boiling and need to release!!!", "I'm going to choose to believe that you mean emotions literally and say it is good to see you as well!", "Oh JoJo, I've missed this duo-act."

VS Dialogue

Mitarai VS Naegi: "You have to understand. We're trying to save the world!", "I can't let you do that. After everything that's happened...we won't let Dio win!"
Mitarai Victory: "Naegi, Dio always liked you. He just has trouble dealing with rejection. But we'll solve that, once I save you."
Naegi Victory: "It's over...it's finally over...Kirigiri...I hope you're watching."

Mitarai VS Asahina: "Asahina, wait! We can create a paradise where there's no loss. You can be with-.", " Shut up!!! Dio took away Sakura, Yuta, and my parents! You took away Kirigiri!!! I'm not letting you get away!"
Mitarai Victory: "You didn't deserve this. It's not much, but maybe this will make you happy, until mankind truly reaches Heaven."
Asahina Victory: "You're so damn lucky...Naegi and I promised your classmates....No matter what, I'll never forgive you!!!

Mitarai VS Kirigiri: "Mitarai, I'm giving you this one chance to stand down. I can't guarantee your survival otherwise.", "I can't-no, I won't turn back! I won't fail him again!"
Mitarai Victory: "I don't think they could have won without you, back at Hope's Peak. It's time for you to join the side of Hope."
Kirigiri Victory: "Virtual Insanity really is a terrifying Stand. But its illusions never stood a chance against Detective Man. You can never hide away from the truth."

Mitarai VS Juzo: "Sakakura, I'm not letting you anywhere near them!", "Look who's decided to be Prince Charming. Time to show you what the real world looks like."
Mitarai Victory: "Your Stand can only take you so far. Victory's always out of reach...you deserve more than this. You deserve hope."
Juzo Victory: "All those fancy tricks don't mean anything when reality kicks in. I'll let Munakata decide what to do with you."

Mitarai VS Hinata: "Izuru Kamukura?! St-Stay back! I'm warning you! I won't let you destroy Heaven!", "Mitarai, you were Dio's first victim out of all of us. If you really thought this was right, why do you always look panicked?"
Mitarai Victory: "I did it! I won! I know why you want to stop this. Dio shouldn't have done what he did to you all. But we'll fix it! Just let me save you and everything will be fine."
Hinata Victory: "You've let yourself be trapped by false certainties. Mitarai, your real friends are waiting for you. We won't let Dio divide us anymore!"

Mitarai VS Sagishi: "...Go away. Just turn back and let me save humanity.", "There is no hope in ending free-will. I may still hesitate to reveal my true identity, but this won't make looking in the mirror any easier."
Mitarai Victory: "I can fix this! I have to save the world, or all this was for nothing! Otherwise there was no point!"
Sagishi Victory: "Mitarai, it's okay. You don't have to find meaning in senseless evil. Atone with the rest of us."

Munakata VS Juzo: "M-Munakata? What are you doing?!" "For the good of the world, all Despair must be destroyed. Even when its inside my friends."
Munakata Victory: "Despair...Dio...you will pay for what you made me do."
Juzo Victory: "You gotta believe me! I'm your friend! Please! I know I don't deserve it, but just let me explain!"

Munakata VS UD!Chisa: "Yukizome? I don't understand. Why?", "Kyosuke, I'm sorry...but Lord Dio's destined to rule this world as its Ultimate Master!"
Munakata Victory: "How...How could you? Chisa, all I ever wanted was the kind world you dreamed of. Or was that a lie too?"
UD!Chisa Victory: "I really do love you. What I'm doing to you is making me feel so much despair. But when I make you into a Remnant like me...aaaa! That'll be the greatest high!"

Munakata VS Tengan: "I have to destroy all obstacles to the end of Despair.", "Always in a rush, never realising the consequences. I suppose it falls to the senior to bring the junior back in line."
Munakata Victory: "My will shall not waver. No matter what I must do."
Tengan Victory: "Such a shame. Still, it's not like you were ever going to achieve your dreams anyway."

Seiko VS Ruruka: "You tried to brainwash me! That's it! I won't let you hurt anyone else!", "The girl who no one likes is acting like she's doing this for other people! You're the one who betrayed me! I'm just trying to survive!"
Seiko Victory: "I won't be your puppet! I won't let you drive anyone else apart because of your selfishness! Die!!!"
Ruruka Victory: "Seiko, you've got a lot to do before you can earn my forgiveness. Get used to bowing. You're going to be doing it a lot more now."

Seiko VS Izayoi: "Ruruka sent her lapdog to deal with me?!", "I have nothing to say to a traitor like you."
Seiko Victory: "Where is she?! I know she's the one behind all this!"
Izayoi Victory: "I won't kill you. Just stay down and out of our way, unless you plan on helping."

Gozu VS Munakata: "Gozu, get out of the way and let me end this.", "A Hope that comes from butchering your comrades? That's nothing more than despair!"
Gozu Victory: "I'd rather die than turn back from what's right. It's why I fought for the Future Foundation, and it's why I'm fighting now!"
Munakata Victory: "If you are not willing to be part of the solution, you're simply a part of the problem."

Gozu VS Juzo: "I always knew we'd fight some day.", "This ain't a fight, Gozu. This is me dealing with another fucker who doesn't know when to quit."
Gozu Victory: "You might have won, if I wasn't protecting Naegi from you and Munakata's insanity."
Juzo Victory: "Fuck...tougher than you look. Not like it meant anything."

Naegi VS Munakata: "Munakata, I can't let you force your ideals onto the world.", "Force my-I sometimes forget how sheltered you were back then. Fine. Let me show you a glimpse of the world I had to experience!"
Naegi Victory: "Hope doesn't come from destruction! I won't let you hurt Class 77-B!"
Munakata Victory: "It is time you did your part for Hope once more. I don't know if you're working with him or not. There's only one way to truly be sure."

Juzo VS Naegi: "I finally found you. I've been waiting a long time to do this.", "S-Sakakura! I won't back down!"
Juzo Victory: "Didn't even need to hit him that much."
Naegi Victory: "Knock You Out...that was a close one. Why does he hate me?"

Dio VS Munakata: "Dio, I finally have the power to end your madness!", "Kyosuke Munakata, you think your Killing In The Name stands a chance against my Holy Diver?!"
Dio Victory: "Ha! Your Stand pathetically relies on all others being like yourself. I, Dio, am guiltless! Now I will end you and the Future Foundation. Nothing will stand between me and Heaven! But maybe I'll indulge in your woman first."
Munakata Victory: "For so long, I could only watch as you destroyed the world...now I have avenged it. Watch from the fires of hell, Dio, as we destroy your armies too."

Dio VS Juzo: "Dio!!! I've spent years letting you haunt me, but now that's done. I've got a Stand and I'm gonna pound you into the fucking dirt!", "Don't make me laugh, Sakakura! You think Knock You Out makes a difference?! I, Dio, will beat you like the mangy dog you are for a second time!"
Dio Victory: "Stand or no Stand, you can never defeat me. I recall telling you the price of defiance. Be thankful that, when you see Munakata again, after he learns of your sins, it'll be as a resurrected slave of Holy Diver!"
Juzo Victory: "Yeah! You like that?! Huh?! Where's all the hot shit gone?! Nowhere! I did it! I finally beat him! Dio Brando...he's finally fucking dead."

Dio VS Yukizome: "Dio! I don't know what you want with my students...but I will never let you take them!", "Ho? A Stand? It doesn't matter. My Holy Diver is unstoppable! Your students shall become slaves to my whims!"
Dio Victory: "Weak! As if I, Dio, could have ever been defeated by such a pitiful Stand. Now you will watch as I destroy your precious students...in fact, you will aid me in this."
Yukizome Victory: "That 'Stand'...it's so strong, but I did it. Everyone's hope has been protected. I need to find Kyosuke or Sakakura, they need to know about this!"

Kizakura VS Juzo: "Out the way, Kizakura. You know you can't win.", "Always with the threats. Y'know, you were a better boxer back when you used to think before punching."
Kizakura Victory: "That was a close one. You can come out now, Kirigiri. This guy's not moving for a while."
Juzo Victory: "Think before punching. Tch, if I'm so dumb, how come I outsmarted you? Now get out here, Kirigiri. I know you're in this room."

Joseph VS HD!Celes: "Oh! So you're an 'Ultimate Gambler'? How about we go a few rounds of cards and see if that's true.", "Very well...just know that I have a trick up my sleeve as well."
HD!Celes Victory: "Lord Dio gifted me with this Stand...I'll have it. The castle and servants I always wanted...far away from that dead world and stupid girl."
Joseph Victory: "That Stand was pretty dangerous. But I've been bullshitting and using tricks longer than you."

Akane VS Wham: "Hey! You look tough! Fight me!", "Those flames! I don't sense any Ripple from her. I shall indulge you!"
Wham Victory: "Impressive, but no human has bested me in battle yet."
Akane Victory: "Eye Of The Tiger burns bright when I get serious. So how'd he do that wind trick again? Just shake his arms?"
Kars VS HD!Dio: "Only one being shall be named Ultimate, and that will be I, Kars!", "Crawl back to the dirt, old man! Holy Diver will destroy you like any other obstacle!"
Kars Victory: "Ha! A human will never stop me from attaining perfection!"
HD!Dio: "Holy Diver's third ability is unstoppable! Enjoy non-existence, 'perfect being'!"

Jotaro VS HD!Celes: "The man who challenges Lord Dio...I'll end you.", "You're gonna try it with that scared look in your eyes?"
Joataro Victory: "Good grief. I've had enough of gamblers."
HD!Celes Victory: "Huh, how disappointing. That Star Platinum might have surpassed even Holy Diver. That'd have made you an A."

UD!Chisa VS Speedwagon: "That woman! She reeks of death and suffering!", "I've been found out? But I took a bath every day."
UD!Chisa Victory: "I can't let anyone else know. It's time for a special kind of expulsion!"
Speedwagon: "I have to warn the others! Even Speedwagon fears her madness."

UD!Chisa VS Jotaro: "So you killed Dio in your world? I guess now's a good a time as any.", "Another Stand user. Good grief, what's with that school?"
Jotaro Victory: "No buds to pull-out. This was easier when they were just assholes and thugs."
UD!Chisa Victory: "No stopping time! I'm afraid I'll have to resort to capital punishment!"

HD!Komaru VS Josuke: "You're Josuke Higashikata! Rohan-sensei told me all about you! Taste We Built This City's justice!", "Wh-What?! Wait, you have the wrong idea! Damnit, Rohan!"
HD!Komaru Victory: "You don't seem like the kind of guys who burns people homes."
Josuke Victory: "It was his fault his house burnt down! Okay, maybe some of it was mine...look, there's context!"

**Holy Diver IF**

Jonathan VS UD!Chisa: "Miss Yukizome, what's happened to you?!", "JoJo, you always were an amazing student. It'd bring me so much despair, so please, die for me?"
Jonathan Victory: "Dio...I don't know what you did to her, but you will pay and this evil will be reversed!"
UD!Chisa Victory: "JoJo, the despair I'm feeling...it's the greatest high! You're being such a good boy for me."

Johnny VS UD!Ibuki: "It's Shitty JoJo over there with the latest single I'm A Little Baby, Please Beat Me Up, Ibuki!", "Just try it. Naegi's not here to save you, if you want to make this a real fight."
Johnny Victory: "...You get one chance to leave. I see you try anything, the nail's going through your skull."
UD!Ibuki Victory: "Wow, you really are lame! I can't believe JoJo used to talk about you to us back in the old days...Lord Dio really showed us how empty Hope was!"

Johnny VS UD!Tanaka: "Lesser Joestar! Prove to the man who had discarded humanity that you have what it takes to succeed JoJo's will!", "Don't you dare act like that's something you can give away!"
Johnny Victory: "Jonathan, what were these people like before they became monsters?"
UD!Tanaka Victory: "As I expected. It seems only Lord Dio was ever worthy of his ties to JoJo."

Giorno VS UD!Kuzuryuu: "Oi, Heir, come on. We giving you the world on a silver platter!", "I want nothing to do with the likes of you."
Giorno Victory: "Consider this your last chance. I don't like to repeat myself in telling you to get out of my country."

UD!Kuzuryuu Victory: "That was a close one! Maybe Sonia was right. Brainwashing might be easier than this."

Giorno VS UD!Tsumiki: "It's really you! The Heir! I've always dreamt of this...I'm gonna have to be rough, but it isn't my fault!", "I've heard of you. All I have to do is keep my distance."

Giorno Victory: "Just speaking to you makes my spine crawl."

UD!Tsumiki Victory: "Don't worry, Giorno. It'll all be fine when you watch the programme. Mama will take good care of you."

Giorno VS Izuru: "Show me it. Show me what a Stand Requiem can do.", "You're the reason that the Remnants have come to my country, aren't you? That cannot go unpunished."

Izuru Victory: "Someone like you who lacks drive or direction can never know this power."

Giorno Victory: "Just speaking to you makes my spine crawl."

Izuru Victory: "Don't worry, Giorno. It'll all be fine when you watch the programme. Mama will take good care of you."

Giorno VS UD!Peko: "Tools like us need only to obey without question. That is what it means to serve.", "That's no way for us to live! I'm not Giorno's tool! I'm his bodyguard! Screw it. I'm taking you down!"

Mista Victory: "The only reason I'm not blasting a hole through your head is because it'd leave four bullet-holes in total. That's a bad number, y'know!"

UD!Peko Victory: "The way your blood goes down the edge of my blade. I haven't felt pleasure like this since Lord Dio."

Kiri: "It's you...the bitch who helped Naegi kill Lord Dio!", "The Ultimate Nurse. I'll have to be careful of her Voodoo."

Kiri: "That was a close one. Despair only seemed to make her more erratic, less focused. Dio's brainwashing worsened them in every way."

UD!Tsumiki Victory: "Look at you. All nice and helpless. If you had simply knelt to Lord Dio, you'd be living a happy life of safety and comfort. So everything that happens now isn't my fault."

Giorno VS Dio: "I've come to put an end to this. An end to your rule.", "I always knew you would reach the top, Giorno. But I, Dio, still sit upon the throne of the world! You wish to topple me? Then fight without restraint!"

Giorno Victory: "Your Holy Diver was everything I feared it would be. But you thought fate would deliver you to glory. I reject you, Father. I'm not a God, I'm a Gang-Star."

Dio: "I will not kill you. But don't think you can scurry back to Italy. When you and your friends return to the bottom, learn from this, and decide whether to serve Dio or uselessly fight against me!"

Giorno VS Mitarai: "Ryota? What are you-", "You have to understand, Giorno...I have to redeem myself! I have to save this world!"

Mitarai: "Ryota, this is not salvation. Not for you, and not for the world."

Mitarai: "Giorno, are you alright?! I promise, I'll get you help. I just need to do this-and then I'll be right back!"

Baby!Giorno-verse

Teen!Giorno VS UD!Sonia: "You little shit! How could you betray your father?! Your own mother?! This isn't even good Despair!", "I can't betray something I was forced into."

Giorno Victory: "I'll free you, mother."
UD! Sonia Victory: "Act like a brat, get punished like one! *SMACK* You're gonna count to a hundred, you're gonna apologise and thank me for this, and then you're watching those films like a good boy. *SMACK* Come on! *SMACK* Or do you want it to be a thousand?! *SMACK* *SMACK*"

Dual Heart Attacks

Munakata/Juzo: Munakata and Juzo charge ahead and begin attacking in combination, co-ordinating sword-blows and punches with one another, as Killing In The Name and Knock You Out do the same. After a five-second combination of strikes, Munakata has Killing In The Name cut at the opponent's chest, and Juzo has Knock You Out deliver an upper-cut to send the opponent flying into the air.

Munakata/Yukizome: The opponent charges at Munakata, only to have their leg caught in a snare and Yukizome holds them in place with her trap. The opponent is open for Killing In The Name to strike a fatal (but not killing) blow.

Juzo/Yukizome: The opponents make an attack on Yukizome who tries to use Another Brick In The Wall but fails as she is outside. Knock You Out appears and punches the opponent into the air. Juzo scolds Yukizome for being reckless before pointing out that the opponent landed indoors. Yukizome manages to reach it in time and uses Another Brick In The Wall to send the opponent flying into Knock You Out's barrage of fists.

Ruruka/Seiko: Ruruka unleashes Sugar Sugar's clouds towards the opponent, only to be caught off-guard when they cover their nose and hold their breath to make an attack. Seiko, using White Rabbit to create a flesh-mask for herself, intercepts and takes her soldier-pills to become beastly. She throws the opponent back into the cloud.

Ruruka/Izayoi: Izayoi blocks an attack aimed at Ruruka. He increases the hardness and cutting power of his knives with Wonderwall and battles with the opponent. Unknown to the opponent, Izayoi also left empty mines for Ruruka to fill with Sugar Sugar's clouds. When she does so, he directs the fight so that the opponent is moving towards the wind and sends the knives into the mine triggers. The mines activate and the wind carries the clouds to the opponent who is affected by Sugar Sugar, dazing them to be knocked out.

Mitarai/Dio: The opponent is holding their own against Dio and is outside. Mitarai tries to intervene and is sent flying back. Frustrated, he uses the Arrow and summons Somebody To Love. Dio gets the upper-hand and Holy Diver punches the opponent away but they are caught by their partner. Unfortunately, the partner is brainwashed by Somebody To Love and holds them for Dio to finish off.

Mitarai/Tengan: Mitarai is almost attacked when Tengan blocks with Megadeth. Peace Sells strengthens his body as he lands a flurry of blows. The opponent is then exposed to Virtual Insanity and quickly loses sight of where they are and what direction they're going in. They only realise they are in an illusion when Killing Is My Business is used to pour dust into the mouth and insides of the opponent. Mitarai, as per Tengan's instructions, is not looking or hearing this.

Kizakura/Kirigiri: Opponent is cornered by Kirigiri and Kizakura. Kirigiri asks the opponent about embarrassing questions and Truth Bullets fire out, as the opponent manages to dodge and reveals a
hidden knife too quick for Detective Man to intercept, only for them to also catch fire as well, giving her time to disarm and knock the opponent down. Kirigiri irritably looks to Kizakura who whistles innocently while the opponent is engulfed in flame. Kirigiri quickly has Detective Man disable their legs and Kizakura puts out the fire.
Special Chapter: Alternate Ending

Chapter Notes

Welp, this is it. I'll do a few more Special Chapters in the far future, but this is the big idea I thought about going with for Hope's Blood. After this, I'll come back if an idea pops in my mind.

In a few months, I hope you'll read whatever oneshots I come up with...and also another idea I have for a Danganronpa/JJBA crossover.

After all, it's only fair that Junko and Mukuro get a turn in the spotlight in JoJo's Despair-Filled Adventure. ;)

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I had a dream. A dream like so many others, but this time...this time! It's the one. I have finally witnessed what has eluded me for so long!

I, Dio, have found the way to reach Heaven and achieve my destiny!

What I'll need is my Stand, Holy Diver. A Stand is but a fragment of a soul. Thus, Dio is Holy Diver and Holy Diver is Dio. I shall need my Stand or, failing that, myself.

To go beyond that power; to negate effect upon myself, resurrect the dead, and even erase another from reality, that is what I need to reach Heaven. Power shall be needed to fuel this.

The lives of more than 36 souls who have sinned, for those who have sinned harbour great power, is needed. I shall need a 'Friend' unmoved by promises political power, fame, wealth, or sexual satisfaction. They are the only one I can trust with the task before them. I shall need to ascend beyond myself and become a 'new being'. Then I shall need 14 words.

Spiral staircase, Rhinoceros beetle, Ruins street, Fig tart, Rhinoceros beetle, Via dolorosa, Singularity point, Giotto, Angel, Hydrangea, Rhinoceros beetle, Singularity point, Secret Emperor.

I'll engrave these words upon my Stand and very soul so that I do not forget them. Not even in death. What is most necessary shall be 'courage'; the courage to destroy my Stand temporarily and, as it disintegrates, the souls of the 36 sinners shall merge with it to create this 'new being'.

It shall awaken and be attached those 14 words that my Friend will utter. My Friend will trust me and I will become his "friend".

The appropriate time and location, set about by gravity, will be necessary where the New Moon will appear and from there...
The broadcast had ended long before they found his Diary. They made sure of that after the body hadn't moved for five minutes and it was clear without a doubt that Dio Brando was finally dead. Only then did they feel safe enough to search through his room for any kinds of details.

They expected to find proof that the world outside really was destroyed, as he claimed, and that the pictures and videos weren't doctored. They expected to find a reason for what he had done beyond ambition.

Instead, they found the Diary, and wished they never did.

"It's for the best." Naegi said, staring as the flames devoured the pages.

Kirigiri nodded, "If one of his followers found this out, and had a Stand of their own, the world itself would be doomed. Whatever he meant by Heaven, it's clearly stronger than Holy Diver."

"He thought he earned everything he had, and yet all he did was steal from others." Togami said.

"W-W-We should destroy the body! We all read that bit! I-It's wh-what someone would need for that power!" Fukawa shrieked.

"There's no time! You heard what he said, before Holy Diver came out," Asahina was biting her lip and gripping her arms tightly. "The air filtration unit won't last long. If we don't leave, we might suffocate."

"Yeah! Besides, we destroyed his Diary! And look at the date! Kirigiri said it looked too fresh to be anything but this morning. There's no way to contact the outside world beyond the cameras and there's none here." Hagakure chirped.

"The only people that know about it are the people in this room. Naegi recalled checking the room for cameras, along with Kirigiri and Togami, and what they found were just props. All to make them think he was a fellow victim.

Maybe they were too tired to act, or maybe just too afraid of what they'd find if they went back to Dio's body. Either way, the choice was silently made to get Oogami, their classmates, and the bodies used for the Murralsee and get them in a dignified position first. Respect to the dead before respect to the monster.

They said nothing when the Future Foundation found them just outside the building. It was no use questioning them when the events had been broadcast all over the world and the memories of everything between first year and now had been erased. Naegi got the feeling that they were just happy to know Dio was dead.

No one talked about the Diary.
No one wanted to believe it could be true.

---

It burned!

Dio could feel the blue electricity crackle and sear its way down to his very core! Komaru Naegi's spirit had somehow managed to hijack We Built This City and turn it on him! Dio Brando himself! Just when he finally took this body for his own and had made Monaca send a message to Mitarai detailing his way into Heaven.

His classmates must have read his Diary. There was no other reason for Fukawa to have said what she did about it, and they had the perfect opportunity after murdering him. That was why he had Monaca tell Mitarai- only known as his 'Friend' to the people in the room- that the Diary had been read.

At first he thought it was simply a pre-caution. A chill up his spine and he gave the order. Had Fate sided with him again?! Had his irritation with Fukawa's insolence actually been his saving grace.

Try as he might, he couldn't escape in time. He knew, just knew, that this was it. We Built This City had hit its mark just fast enough that it struck before Dio could even escape Komaru's body. His resurrection was his own undoing!

Damn it! How could We Built This City have this power? Komaru was meant to be broken! A useless meat-suit until I, Dio, reached Heaven! Dio couldn't speak the words. The pain was too much and he could feel his features burning away.

Komaru had her hands over her mouth as she stared at the spirit rapidly breaking apart into nothing! A killer. Just like her pathetic friend. They could both whimper into each other's arms when Kira and the Saint Murralsee was done with them.

The Vizier still lived! Its body could easily survive the fall and the head of Dio's original body was maintained! Ryota would surely try to save it!

Dio was dying but he felt hope well up in his gut. Ryota's Talent and his Virtual Insanity would easily manipulate one of the Class 78 survivors. All he'd need to do was get close enough and then he'd have them as a slave! A slave willing to tell him everything.

It would not be Dio who reached Heaven first, but Ryota was a true Friend. He had been chosen for his purpose for his purity and absolute loyalty.

Yes, even as Dio felt the last shards of his spirit break away and become nothing, he was still in the lead. He still faced death and laughed out loud in triumph. This meant nothing! A mere blip compared to the eternity he would embrace when Ryota would resurrect him.

Ryota, you will reach Heaven, and then humbly stand aside when I, Dio return! That is our fate. We will reach Heaven and I shall find true happiness. All of humanity will find peace of mind under my rule! This is but a mere nuisance!
That confidence, the sense of certainty in his own superiority, was what brought Dio this far.

As he died, it was what made him approach death with some form of dignity. Let Komaru and Fukawa have their little victory, if they even survived all this, because it didn't matter one bit.

Dio's victory was inevitable.

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"...and that's it? Those were the co-ordinates the Diary gave?" Mitarai asked, leaning into the desk.

"Relative to the gravity of the sun, earth, and moon at that specific date. Still, I think you'll be able to calculate a different location with the proper websites, now that the internet's reaching pre-Tragedy levels of activity. No reason for a different date to interfere with your plans." Kirigiri replied.

She appreciated him coming here to discuss supporting Naegi in the oncoming discussions about his disobeying orders for Class 77-B and putting them into the Neo-World Program. He'd need all the support he could get against Munakata's zealotry. It wasn't much, but she appreciated it.

They even had some small talk. He showed her some of his work and she was telling him stories about what she had found at Hope's Peak.

The only people who knew the truth about Dio's Diary were those who Kirigiri trusted most and she felt like she could trust Mitarai. There was just something about him that lowered all her defences and made her want to tell him everything. She had already locked the door and shut all the curtains at his request. No need for interlopers.

"I think that's all I need. Thank you, Kirigiri." Mitarai pushed back his chair and stood up. "I know what I must do to reach Heaven."

"Reach Heaven?" Kirigiri asked, with no small amount of confusion. Why did that seem like something she should-

"Don't tell anyone about what we discussed here. Just forget about it. Okay? When I click my fingers, you'll remember absolutely nothing." Mitarai instructed, revealing the bright patterns on his phone again.

"Of course. You have a right to privacy." Kirigiri had tried working on her tendency to be insensitive at times, but Rome wasn't built in a day.

Mitarai clicked his fingers and Kirigiri knew nothing from the moment he entered her office to the moment he left it. There was nothing but a blur in her mind that she just couldn't get past. As if someone took the memories from her head and defaced them.

It took an hour before the brainwashing wore off and she started to wonder why she couldn't remember.

It was three days later, when Kirigiri tripped and crashed her head on the corner of her desk and awoke after three hours, that she realised what had happened.
She realised what Mitarai was going to do.

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It looked so small and helpless. You would never think that it had been born from the death of thirty-six souls.

_They were evil. Evil, terrible people who would have cheered at the death of children._ Mitarai reminded himself, as he crouched down and looked at the Green Baby. It gurgled and laughed as it crawled forward without a single care. _I guess it's ironic that a child would come from their souls._

Getting to Towa City wasn't that hard, not least because it was still in a state of war, however much it was dying down, but the hard part was getting Monaca to help. In fact, getting Monaca to do anything was the hard part. The young girl had lost all of her energy for fighting and activity by now.

Still, once she saw the head and heard his promise, she helped him find the dregs of the Resistance. Now those sinners had given their lives for something greater.

Mitarai stared at the Green Baby and kept his distance. Whatever its Stand was called, its power was something to look out for. Approaching it the way he did was only going to cause him trouble; almost as much trouble as it posed to the Towa City Rescue Team.

_We Built This City...I can see why you wanted Komaru Naegi's body so much._ Mitarai mused to himself. Dio always did like the strong Stands and We Built This City's powers made it one of the deadliest Stands he had ever seen. It was even stronger than Virtual Insanity.

What it wasn't stronger than was an animation programme designed to give seizures.

Rohan Kishibe, Fukawa, and those two brothers were treating her a few dozen feet back and had been ordered to ignore him. None of them noticed Virtual Insanity in time to look away from the carefully crafted light-displays that warped their minds. He was safe to speak with the Green Baby in peace.

"Here goes nothing," Mitarai stared down at the child and spoke quietly but clearly, "Spiral staircase, Rhinoceros beetle, Ruins street, Fig tart, Rhinoceros beetle, Via dolorosa, Singularity point, Giotto, Angel, Hydrangea, Rhinoceros beetle, Singularity point, Secret Emperor!"

The Baby looked up at him, tilted its head to the right, and began to crawl towards him. Mitarai extended a hand to grab onto the child and get it somewhere safe so that they could merge together in-

It bit him, and the flesh and muscles on his left arm were ripped from the bone.

Mitarai screamed in agony, blinded by the pain, and the nerves all over his body were ignoring the baby somehow pulling him forwards because there was too much pain.

It hurt! It hurt! Was this what Dio felt when Komaru destroyed him?

He cried and wailed from the agony of it. Bones weren't meant to be in the open air and flesh wasn't meant to be waving and moving around like tendrils. It was still attached to his skin and he could feel
it wrapping around something and merging with it and Mitarai didn't notice because it hurt and he was crying and he wanted Dio to tell him he'd be alright-

The pain stopped.

How much time had passed? It was hard to tell. Listening to the voices in the wind, he could tell that it was enough that Komaru was beginning to come out of her seizure. It'd be a question of how long until she noticed Virtual Insanity's effect on her friends then. Once they were free, they could come after him.

Mitarai looked down at his left arm and saw a limb that was entirely intact. Not a single bit of skin had flaked off and moving it was as easy as it was meant to be. Not even the bite-mark from the Green Baby remained on his left index finger. Had it all been a dream?

When he brushed his fingers against his hair, he realised that this was not a dream. Where the top part of his hair had been smooth, it was now spiked and wild, just like Dio's had been. Patting his own face and body down, Mitarai discovered that his eyebrows had become more defined and sharper, almost like the Green Baby's spikes, and the ends of his hair were coiling upwards as if pulled upwards.

This was what came from the merging of Ryota Mitarai and the Green Baby.

If his body had changed, then had Virtual Insanity's appearance changed as well? He scanned the area to see where the tiny Stand had gone and found nothing. Maybe the problem was that he was searching for Virtual Insanity.

Not even a blink of an eye and he saw it. Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the air was a Stand that looked as if the Green Baby itself had grown up. On its head it wore the feather head-dress of a native American chief and it gazed at Mitarai with blood-red eyes that were calmly waiting for orders. It sat and raised its right hand to gently glides its fingers with the wind, almost pretending to paint with them.

Yes, this was his Stand. The Stand that would allow him to reach Heaven. All he had to do now was head back to the overseas branch of Hope's Peak Academy and reach the place where he would embrace Heaven and create a world of happiness.

The dream he and Dio shared and worked so hard for was about to be fulfilled. There would be no more pain or suffering or despair in Heaven; as everyone would understand one another as well as their fate. All sins would be erased and there would be absolute certainty about tomorrow.

Eternal Hope.

And if anyone got in the way, Mitarai would use his Corner Of The Earth to deal with them.

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Komaru struggled against the force of Saturn's gravitational pull.

Yes, she really was struggling with it. Not the planet Saturn; she was pretty sure that even We Built This City couldn't protect her from the vacuum of space if that was the case. No, she was dealing
with the pull of a tiny version of Saturn itself, just like the others were dealing with the pull of a miniature galaxy.

Not a galaxy. Komaru remembered enough to realise that this wasn't a galaxy. This was a solar system. From the dwarf-planet Pluto to Jupiter to Uranus to the Earth itself, the miniature planets span around their sun and caught everyone near them within their gravity.

Not Mitarai. He simply stood and watched with unconcerned eyes as the small army assembled against him were swimming against an invisible and unstoppable tide. The Rescue Team, the former Warriors of Hope, Makoto's group, and the few Branch Heads that were still standing, all of them span around him.

They had come together after realising what Mitarai did and had searched everywhere they could for signs of where he was going next. The Future Foundation HQ had been turned upside down for even the slightest bit of evidence of his plans. No luck in finding him.

Yukizome and Tengan had went as a group and came back trying to wipe them all out. The Rescue Team had to fight off Mitarai's falcon, Pet Shop, whilst the Branch Heads dealt with Tengan's Megadeth. Munakata and the Class 78 survivors handled Yukizome herself. The renegade teacher was now in confinement and everyone dealing with her had came to help.

Makoto didn't say how she was stopped.

All they found was a finished anime- filled with brainwashing techniques- in his room along with a key. A key that only worked on the broadcast room and revealed something that made Komaru sick to her stomach.

Dio's decaying head and Monaca's Stand Arrow.

The next few hours had been chaos. Mitarai stormed the building with Monaca and his Stand was unlike anything they had seen before. He could summon beasts from mythology and they could hurt just as much as anything real could. His Stand just had to move its hands and a new enemy could appear.

Monaca downstairs held off Makoto and the others until the former Warriors of Hope arrived to help. Kokoto wanted to do worse to her, but she had been dragged up to help the fight against Mitarai himself.

A lot of good that did. The most they knew about his Stand was that its range was about 7m and that it could create whatever it liked within that range. There was nothing they could do to break free from its illusions, from where Komaru was standing. Not really standing. She was hovering thanks to Saturn's pull.

Mitarai looked directly at her and said, "We Built This City can defeat any affliction, can't it? Sickness or infections or even the power of Virtual Insanity can't defeat it," He frowned and stepped towards her, pushing his solar system along with him. "But it's not an unbeatable Stand. You aren't immune to all Stand effects. Corner Of The Earth blurs the line between fiction and reality. My creations become one with the world around me."

"Mitarai, you have to think about what you're doing. The kind of power that this Heaven offers...it's not something that should belong to anyone." Kirigiri said from Jupiter. She had to grunt out the words as her focus was on keeping the cobra in her hands from biting down on her neck.
"I've never seen it, but I know it's work. All you'll be doing is destruction, even if you think the opposite. For all the dreams of a new world, you'll just be killing people." Rohan scoffed, even as he kept a tight grip on Pluto. "Is that what your world of Hope is? A world where no one is around to say what you don't want to hear?"

"Shut up. Dio told me about people like you; the kind who look down and spit on people." Mitarai wrapped his arms around himself, as if to protect himself. All while he kept everyone away. "He accepted me. He said he was my friend."

Makoto reached out from Mercury, Livin' On A Prayer's hands were stuck on the planet's surface, and said, "He may have been telling the truth, Mitarai, but he was still wrong. We can still fix this and make it right. Just let us go and-"

"Fuck that!" Sakakura screamed. Knock You Out wrenched its right fist from Jupiter's orbit and punched forward.

The glowing golden glove lost its shine, but it got the job done. Out from the punch came a burst of wind so violent that almost blew the planets out of their gravitational pull themselves. The people trapped within the orbit just managed to avoid getting blown away or hit by the blast, as it came flying towards Mitarai. He didn't move a single inch to get away.

With a defiant roar, the air-blast made it to Mitarai...and passed straight through him.

Mitarai sharply exhaled and ignored the confusion on everyone's face, "You see, Naegi? Sakakura's been plagued by uncertainty and doubt for so long that hurting is all he knows. He fights against despair and then just spreads it." He smiled and waved his hand over. Mercury softly wafted closer to him. "Wouldn't you be happier in a world of truth and understanding?" Corner Of The Earth began to make gestures with its fingers again.

"Don't even think about it." Asahina snapped. Her warning was clear, despite the small pool of water in front of her, caught in Neptune's pull. Komaru felt the same way, renewing her struggle.

"Mitarai, you truly think that a world without free will is a world of hope? At least Dio revelled in his villainy, but you?" Munakata glared from besides Sakakura. "You're an evil that doesn't even know that it's evil."

"When you see it, Munakata. When you see it, you'll understand." Mitarai replied.

He turned his back and walked towards the window. They had cornered him, or maybe he lured them, in one of the conference rooms on the highest floor of the building. It was mostly empty apart from tables and chairs that had long since been destroyed. All that was left was Mitarai and the forces assembled against him.

Forces left unable to do anything as he walked towards the window. Komaru wasn't an idiot; whatever the animator meant by Heaven, it was in that direction. Everyone doubled their efforts and were down-right assaulting the planets with their Stands, no matter how pointless it was.

Komaru refused to let the team down. We Built This City's shield was summoned again and again, extending and retracting at random points to keep her weight changing. It distorted the pull of Saturn and let her slowly budge closer to Mitarai.
Come on, Komaru! You have to fight it! Use all your strength! Be the heroine Touko, Rohan-sensei, and everyone else says you can be! Komaru struggled as she made the slow advance. Makoto was screaming something—either encouragement or a warning to stay back—but Komaru focused on the prize.

Mitarai looked back and couldn't stop the amazement on his face, quickly morphing to fear, then disappearing as quickly as it came. His lips wobbled and a short, empty laugh burst from his lops. His right eye twitched.

"The Naegi siblings. You and everyone else here really are exceptional. To have defeated despair the way you did is actually inspiring. But normal people can't do that! The weak can't win! That's why struggling like this is useless!" Mitarai wrapped his arms around himself again and giggled madly. The same word coming out of his mouth. "Useless, useless, use-!"

"If I ever hear that word again, I swear I'm going to tear my ears off."

A figure made entirely of stain-free glass, its skin revealing a bright sky with rushing clouds, flew besides Komaru and cleared the remaining 5m distance without a problem. Its right fist crashed against Mitarai's chest and Komaru felt the gravitational forces pulling her back come to a stop. She managed to fall onto her feet, but some of the others didn't have that luck.

The solar system vanished and all Komaru heard was a body crumpling to the floor before rushing to her team's side. They had to do something! They had to make sure he was captured before he-

"You! You're the Remnants of Despair!" Gozu growled, cautiously eyeing a woman with red eyes who stood along the wall.

"We'd prefer to not use the name Dio forced onto us." A woman in a special-ops suit said. Her hair was blonde and pretty and she looked like a fairy-tale princess, helping Asahina up.

"Yeah, how about a little gratitude for your saviours?!" Asked a kid with a nearly-shaved head and an eye-patch. He and Sakakura mutually growled and the way Munakata stared at the kid with brown spiked hair whose Stand punched Mitarai, gripping the sword in his hand, made Komaru wonder if a fight was about to break out.

"Hey, hey!" A woman's voice called out, so familiar to Komaru. She only last heard it when readying to fight her. "You don't do good deeds to be thanked! You do them because they're nice!" She scolded, but not really.

Her voice was too warm and loving for that. It was so different from how she was when she was trying to smash the bodies of her enemies together with Another Brick In The Wall. A monster willing to butcher children had become a mother-like figure with just a couple of words.

Munakata lost his grip on his sword and stood up on shaking legs.

Chisa Yukizome, supported by a tanned girl with big boobs and a tiny skirt and a guy with shark-like teeth and pink hair, smiled softly at Munakata and Sakakura. There was no trace of despair in her eyes. "A lot of things can happen when you have faith in people. A lesson we all could learn from this, including you, Mitarai." She said, turning to the animator.

This wasn't all of the former Remnants of Despair. There were about six of them in number, but all of them were looking at Mitarai with hopeful expressions. Even Komaru thought they were being
too optimistic, when looking at Mitarai cowering like a cornered animal.

He glared at Makoto and spat, "I won't -"

Another punch to the chest from the shiny Stand and Mitarai shot back so fast that he broke through the window with ease. The last Komaru heard was a distant scream and hurried whispering to Yukizome. She didn't think the guy with the heterochromia would do that again.

"The others are waiting down there. They've already made sure that he'll be caught. Don't Stop Me Now altered the future; the worst he'll have is a couple of bruises." The Stand-user said. He crouched and helped Naegi up and everything seemed alright again.

There was such a flurry of quick and hushed conversation that the atmosphere shattered. As if that final blow ended the battle and now all there was to do was make Monaca and Mitarai face justice. Have them atone in some way and then get back to fixing Towa City for the Rescue Team, and repairing the world for the others.

Komaru wanted nothing more than to talk with her friends about how crazy this day was. But her attention was directed solely at Nagisa Shingetsu and the way he was gripping his hair in panic. His face was pale and drenched in sweat, Nirvana Act 1 by his eye, and the other Warriors of Hope were uneasily holding him in comfort. They weren't used to doing this for him; the one they could always rely on.

Kirigiri was eyeing him nervously as well. She whispered something in Makoto's ear and Komaru's brother stopped talking with the Stand-user who saved them, his name was Hinata apparently. Both of them turned to Shingetsu and approached him softly with Kirigiri.

Hinata barely extended a hand in comfort when Shingetsu threw his head up.

"Why did you do that?!" He screamed in desperation and anger.

Makoto tried to speak softly, despite all attention now on Shingetsu, "Don't worry, Don't Stop Me Now."

"Can cancel certainty, I know! But do you realise what you just did?!" Shingetsu pointed ahead towards the broken window. "The direction you hit him towards, I can see it! Nirvana somehow knows that the direction he fell was towards."

"The co-ordinate I gave him." Kirigiri, from the little time that Komaru knew of her, had never spoken with such fear. Her face turned blue as she said, "This very spot was where he was supposed to be in an hour's time, but he didn't have to be here. But his downward trajectory."

"Unless he managed to fly up to that position." Fukawa whispered from Komaru's side. There was no way that could happen. He'd need to create dozens of birds with his Stand and the projections didn't affect him anyway.

"Hey! What's he doing?!" Hagakure's son, the one with the crazy hair who no one seemed to listen to, pointed to the sky and barely kept his voice steady.

All eyes turned to the outside where they saw it. Mitarai was flying in the sky, gently pushed upwards by the wind itself, whilst a man wearing a purple scarf, dark clothing, and had wings
spouting out was desperately trying to get a grip on him. He was too far for them to do anything and Corner Of The Earth's intangibility meant it wouldn't have mattered.

They could only just hear the mad edge in his voice as he flew higher and higher. Togami collapsed onto his knees and Komaru felt Fukawa's clammy grip on her hand tighten. Rohan did the same, but holding onto her shoulder, while Boingo hugged both her and his older brother.

"Dio! We did it! The New Moon has come! Humanity is saved!" Mitarai screamed. He reached a certain point in the sky and it happened.

Both him and Corner Of The Earth had beams of pure light burst from them. Did it come from holes opening in their bodies, or was it simply the natural ones where darkness within became nothing but blinding shine.

Komaru had to cover her eyes with everyone else to keep herself from being blinded by the light. It enveloped the skies, the building, and everything around them as screams became masked by a mad cackle of a lost soul.

Ryota Mitarai had reached Heaven.

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Naegi wondered if this fear was what Dio wanted from him, back at Hope's Peak when he revealed Holy Diver.

The HQ of the Future Foundation had once stood upright as a testament to humanity's refusal to submit to Dio's madness and ambition. Now it was in the shape of a semi-circle with the top of the building going across the sea and embedding itself into the ground. Naegi and the others had just managed to escape through the windows before their floor was flooded with dirt.

Mitarai had seemingly disappeared after reaching the New Moon but no one believed that for a second. They knew he was out there; waiting for them to expose themselves and let him strike. If his Stand was supposed to surpass Virtual Insanity and Corner Of The Earth, it must have been a nightmare.

They had no idea what they were fighting against.

A small group of Stand users working together were unbeatable. Their powers could easily cover the weaknesses of the others and there were some tough hitters among their number. We Built This City, Heaven's Door, Detective Man, The Ocean, Killing In The Name, Knock You Out, and that wasn't counting Class 77-B and the ex-Warriors of Hope.

As Naegi looked up at the shining person hovering above like an angel himself, he wondered if they could have done anything with even a hundred Stand users fighting as one.

Ryota Mitarai stood just beneath his Stand; the strangest looking one that Naegi had ever seen, and gazed down at his remaining enemies. He always had the look of a wounded animal about him, even when fighting his hardest. That was nowhere to be seen now. Nothing there but the serenity that came with certain victory.
His Stand began with six circles on the outside that arranged themselves in a hexagonal pattern and then had six circles inside that pattern in the same order. Only these six circles had their sides touching one another unlike the first, meaning that they left room for a final circle in the very centre of that second pattern. That third circle right in the centre held a star tetrahedron inside it. The centre-point of each circle had a line connecting them to one another, from the outer layer of circles to the centre-most one, and each circle that a different colour.

It might have just looked confusing instead of horrifying, if Naegi hadn't seen what Mitarai could do with it. No attacks worked on it- or if they did, the damage was erased in an instant- and it showed no sign of activating beyond its effects on the world.

Or Naegi could just look at the victims of Mitarai's Stand themselves.

The Warriors of Hope didn't want to be here. They had only come to bring Monaca to justice and were facing against the dream they fought for come to life, in the worst way possible. It was easy to forget that they were just kids. It wasn't as hard to realise when seeing Kotoko, Daimon, and Jataro, all hiding behind Shingetsu as if he'd protect them.

Not when he was shaking and on the verge of a mental breakdown. Whatever Nirvana Act 1 was telling him, it was enough to break his spirit.

"T-That's Metatron's Cube! The very map of Creation itself!" Shingetsu shakily pointed at the shape behind Mitarai. "The physical matter of our universe, colour, sound, light, the elements, even the energy between sub-atomic particles. All of that is said to be represented by a field of energy in the form of that very shape!"

Togami tried to seem sceptical, but his terror kept him from adopting his usual dismissive tone, "What do you mean? Metatron's Cube is simply a concept from sacred geometry! There's no way it could-"

"Nirvana Act 1 can tell me the powers of a Stand! Do you understand what that means?! It means I know exactly what Ryota Mitarai's Stand is capable of!" Shingetsu snapped. Anger turned to despair, however, as he curled into a ball, muttering, "We can't win. We can never win."

"Shingetsu, why are you in Despair? Are we not on the path towards Heaven? Look at the Branch Heads and see what I have done for them." Mitarai motioned his left arm to the small group besides him. The first people who tried to fight him.

The remaining Branch Heads of the Future Foundation- apart from Kirigiri and Yukizome- were either on their knees or lying on the floor. They had been the first to try and attack Mitarai when he appeared, and were the first to fall. Mitarai had simply smiled at them and told them to stop.

A second passed and they turned into what they were now. Practically lifeless corpses who were either drooling or weeping at whatever it was Mitarai made them see. Empty joy made their eyes shining white, like Mitarai's skin, and the most Naegi could hear from them were soft laughs. They were enjoying their own little heaven.

It was the most terrifying thing Naegi had ever seen.

Hagakure stepped back at the sight of the defeated, "Maybe if we run, we-"

"There's nothing we can do!" Shingetsu shook off Jataro and Masaru's hands on his shoulders.
"When Mitarai ascended into Heaven, he attained the power of God himself! This world, no, this universe, is nothing more than the canvas for which the artist may use however he likes. He can make whatever changes and alterations he desires! The rules of reality itself are now decided by him! This is the Stand that Dio searched for. All so that he could create the ideal world. But this? This is different, but no less terrifying! We've lost! All we can do is fall onto our knees and beg mercy from the most powerful and terrifying Stand of all,"

Mitarai held his arms apart as if basking in his own glory, or offering a hug, and spoke in a level tone to reflect Shingetsu's frantic scream.

"Genesis!"

The origin or creation of something. It made sense that the Stand that would create a new world would have such a name. A Stand that could seemingly twist and bend the minds of others just as easily as it could with the laws of physics.

Naegi could only think of one person who could even fight against Genesis and that man was stepping up to the fray, with Class 77-B, students and teacher, right behind him.

Don't Stop Me Now was the last beacon of hope they had left.

"No matter what kind of Stand he has, it still creates certainty. Certainty that can still be erased."
Hinata narrowed his eyes and Don't Stop Me Now began to shine, the bright clouds on its glass skin beginning to rush forward into a tempest. "Mitarai, you're our friend, and we will rescue you. Even if it means-"

Mitarai raised a hand and Don't Stop Me Now's right arm fell from its body. There was nothing but a slight crack and the arm fell from the glass body, collapsing onto the ground and shattering into glass fragments. Hinata's own arm burst into a sea of blood that vanished into nothing. Not even a drop on his shirt.

Of course Genesis would let it be clean. Why stain Mitarai's perfect world?

The atmosphere had changed; small defiant hope giving way to endless crushing despair. Hinata kept himself from screaming out loud, yet everyone could hear the sounds coming out of a furiously shut mouth. He fell to one knee and Class 77-B dashed to his side to try and help out somehow.

Hinata's eyes were bulged and, for the first time, he looked afraid.

Nothing like Mitarai, who simply laughed pleasantly.

"The Lord taketh," Mitarai waved his hand and Hinata's arm was restored to its original state. Don't Stop Me Now's arm was back too, as if nothing had happened. "And the Lord giveth. It's a reverse on the saying, but I think it works just as well." He threw up his arms and looked at Class 77-B with joy, "Everyone, you still bear the scars of Dio's actions. I hope you'll see that the bigger picture was necessary, but I can fix the smaller problems."

With a click of his fingers, every single one of his classmates, and his teacher, stumbled in place. It was an invisible force shoving them a single millimetre back and that didn't matter a damn because of one single reason.

Kuzuryuu's eye-patch fell and revealed no scar and a fully restored right eye. Peko's torn clothing
revealed no scars but perfect pale skin.

"I-I-I can feel it! Everything Dio did to us...it's gone!" Sonia cried out. She revealed the place where a scar was meant to have been over her heart, and there was nothing.

"What the hell did he do?" Souda hissed. The other members of Class 77-B were patting themselves down for old wounds and found nothing.

"Simple body alterations are nothing for Genesis. All as part of my efforts as the Ultimate Hope. What Makoto Naegi and Hajime Hinata can only promise to overcome, I can give you a cure." Mitarai said.

Naegi couldn't stop himself from falling. His legs had lost their energy and Kirigiri was the only thing keeping him up, even if her grip was almost enough to break his shoulder. She was just as frightened as he was.

"That reminds me. It's only fair that I rearrange the rules of reality to make sure nothing goes wrong, isn't it? Of course it is." Mitarai didn't need them to answer. Why would he when he had Genesis?

Light burst forth and formed two sentences beneath Mitarai's feet, declaring the new rules of this world to the sinful masses.

*Ryota Mitarai shall never be harmed.*

*Stands are ineffective against Ryota Mitarai.*

Naegi felt bile rush up his throat and the dark twisted feeling inside him grew stronger again. They could all run and flee in terror and what would be the point?

_He's God. It makes sense. He went to Heaven and now he's God._ Naegi couldn't stop his body from shaking. _Livin' On A Prayer_ couldn't fire any Hope Bullets in his state, not that it'd even matter. They were ants fighting a human now. _If I beg, maybe he'll spare us. He can convince Dio to let us live in peace and-

"When I tell you, take your friends and run." Hinata whispered, keeping a firm grip on his shoulder. "The Warriors of Hope won't do anything- Shingetsu's words have broken them and Mitarai will only brainwash them into inactivity. I and the others can guard the rear. The fact that he hasn't brainwashed us all yet says that there are limits. He's not God. He's not omniscient, he's not omnipresent, and he's not omnipotent, whatever he thinks."

"But what about you?" Kirigiri asked, standing by Naegi's left while Hinata was on his right.

"I have a plan. It's probably the only plan we have left." Hinata's eyes switched to where the Rescue Team were. "We'll need Kishibe, so move on my signal."

"I can hear you, you know." Mitarai tapped his right ear, as if showing that he had given himself super-hearing as well.

That didn't stop Hinata, and the rest of Class 77-B, including Yukizome, from standing firm. Komaru, Fukawa, and Rohan all looked at least somewhat defiant and that very determination was infectious. Naegi felt something ignite inside of him, the same as his friends, and the urge to crawl away and beg for mercy faded away.
Hinata flared Don't Stop Me Now, "Sorry, Mitarai, but if you think we'll give up to flashy shows of force,"

Rohan's Heaven's Door sat on his shoulder and its glower matched its user's, "If you think we'll simply lay down and worship you as a God,"

Asahina already had The Ocean spit out two spheres of water as large as her torso, "Be thankful that you'll make Dio the ruler of this world,"

"Let you decide how the world works," Oingo grunted as he sat Boingo on his shoulder, even as his legs were directed more at running to safety than anything,

"Throw away our dignity," Togami's Gold somehow managed that infamous Togami glare just as well as he could.

"Become your bitches," Fukawa muttered, hand hovering over the taser besides her.

"Give up on tomorrow," Hagakure stuttered out, handling that expensive crystal ball carefully.

Komaru's We Built This City pulled its ahoge out and aimed the gun right at Mitarai, growling softly as Komaru said, "Embrace the world you want instead of what we've fought for,"

"And give into this despair you think is hope, then we've got one thing to say to you." Naegi was inspired by his friends. He cast away the despair gnawing at his soul, and threw his hand forward and pointed a finger at Mitarai; looking annoyed and frustrated by this show of defiance to the end.

"You got that wrong!!!

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"What did you think would happen?" He actually sounded remorseful too.

Hajime Hinata laid on the ground completely and utterly defeated. Mitarai hovered above the ground and gave off a soft white glow, and behind him was Genesis’ constant movement, and he looked at them with pity. The way a friend would upon seeing them at their rock-bottom, lying in the gutter like trash.

Class 77-B together were meant to have been an unstoppable force. Together, they had destroyed the world itself. Now they were lying prone on the ground and were nothing but test-runs for Mitarai's new power. Not a single one of them managed to even lay a scar on him.

Genesis truly was a Stand of Heaven. Holy Diver, Boulevard of Broken Dreams, and even Don't Stop Me Now were nothing compared to its power. It twisted and turned reality into nothing more than a canvass through which Mitarai could decide the fate of the world. A Stand that was only limited by the imagination itself.

I can't believe that. Not with what I saw with my own eyes. Hinata remembered ordering the Naegi siblings and Class 78 back. They'd been hiding after losing two of the Rescue Team. The Oingo Boingo Brothers had already been brainwashed into inaction, and Rohan Kishibe was all he had left.
to find victory.

They knew why. For all the tears, Komaru knew why just as much as her brother did, as they hid.

Rohan took it well. "What's the point in writing manga if it's going to be ruined by a God who's a slave to the devil?" He asked, barely showing his fear.

All that mattered was that Class 77-B, students and teacher alike, fought their hardest to expose Mitarai for just a moment. That very moment where his weakness would be revealed.

Heaven's Door could work on him.

Mitarai had been horrified when his face opened into pages on a book. Rohan barely got a pen out before the new God panicked and cut the mangaka horizontally in two and sent the top half flying into the sky. Hinata barely caught him in time and passed him over to Class 78.

Don't Stop Me Now couldn't be used to keep him alive. Hinata had to trust that there was a twisted morality in Mitarai that forbade killing yet allowed cosmic lobotomies. He simply focused on the job he had and began the next step in their plan. All while Mitarai's Genesis was turning Rohan's eyes white with pure Hope; making him see visions of 'Koichi' and 'Reimi' with everyone else. He was being cut-off from the real world and being dragged into a fantasy.

When it was done, he sent away the world's only hope and told them to protect that hope at all costs.

All that was left was for Hinata to face up against Heaven itself and see how long fallen angels could last against Genesis' pure overwhelming existence. He prayed they'd buy at least ten minutes for the others to head for safety and plan.

It took Mitarai twenty-two seconds to crush every single one of his opponents.

Hinata guessed that earned him an explanation for his question.

"It wasn't for nothing. We...bought them time....get away and do something." Hinata replied. It was hard to move when you had one arm and holding onto dear life to nearby rubble. Reverse gravity was a bitch.

"It was the least we could do, to atone." Tsumiki kept her grip on Hinata's arm and a nearby stone and spoke through her tears. "Mitarai, your Genesis can help a lot of people. Please don't use it for Dio. His dream...it's evil...pure evil..."

"Just because you can erase effect; maybe even our memories as well. It doesn't mean it didn't happen. You can't create a world where Dio is free of sin." Peko said with a tinge of remorse. It might have just been pain from the acid spitting from the handle of her kendo stick.

Hanamura laughed without humour, his feet having become one with the ground. "I can make a lot of great dishes with bad ingredients, but that'd just leave a bad taste no matter what."

"You're stronger than this. There's more to strength than power." Nidai said. It was a miracle he could keep calm his legs had reverted to when he was sick as a child.

"There is no comfort in solitude. The light you hold will only blind you into darkness." Tanaka pleaded from the trees that bound his body.
"We can still stop this. Get together and make happy memories." Koizumi didn't even seem to care that she'd been blinded.

Saionji looked to have worked out how to speak when your nervous system went into reverse. "I promise I won't bully you too bad in revenge for this."

"I always wanted to witness the Ultimate Hope. Now I'm helping him survive despair like none other by doing this. I'm helping you out as well, though. I don't see how you can create hope with a Stand like that." Komaeda mused. Hinata wondered if it really sank in that Mitarai probably did strip him of his Luck Talent.

"We can still be together as a class. Maybe if I investigated harder, I could have brought you into the class, and we'd have avoided this whole mess. Can't a teacher help a student out, once in a while?" Yukizome softly smiled and crawled forward. Another Brick In The Wall was useless outside and she still came anyway.

"Mitarai, it's not too late to turn back." Sagishi was the only one, other than Yukizome, who hadn't been struck down by Genesis in some way. All that happened was that he couldn't move.

"I stopped time. You're not buying anyone any time." Mitarai said, refusing to look any of them in the eye.

"And Don't Stop Me Now negated it." Hinata replied. "Just because it doesn't effect you, doesn't mean it won't help them instead." He smiled and shrugged his shoulders at Mitarai's look of horror. "Loopholes, man. You can't control everything. Not even with Genesis."

Mitarai's desperation turned into passive acceptance. "I guess I'll deal with them a bit later then." He either looked at them with regret at what he was about to do, or pity at their refusal to simply accept his 'paradise'. "Goodbye, everyone. When you next see me, it'll be when the interlopers are dealt with."

"We're not going to let you." Hinata's eyes blazed and he let go of the rock. It was certain that, because of Genesis, he would move up until reaching space.

As if that ever meant anything.

Don't Stop Me Now negated the certainty of Genesis' power over Class 77-B and everyone was freed again. Mitarai's Stand may have had the power to overwrite reality, and none of their Stands could hurt him, but he didn't control everything. There were limits to his Stand and that was worth fighting for.

Class 77-B readied themselves while their lost friend couldn't get the words out. It was as if all his power and godhood washed away from him in that very instant.

"Why?" Mitarai growled, doing his best to sound angry. If he was angry, then the tears wouldn't be so obvious. "What is it about him that makes you all want to doom yourselves? It's over. Heaven is coming! You can't stop this now!" He frantically looked around himself and screamed, "It's too late!"

"It's never too late, Mitarai. All it takes is the desire to atone." Sagishi waited for what seemed like an eternity.
Class 77-B didn't hesitate in charging ahead and readying their Stands. They threw everything they had at Mitarai, knowing it was completely meaningless. That didn't matter. No one thought they could really stop Genesis.

It was for those handful of seconds that the others spent running and making a plan of their own. Each one was worth a hundred of their own lives. Karma was against them. They had done so much evil in their lives that it had to come back to bite them at the worst time possible.

That might have been why Mitarai only had to blink his eyes and they were destroyed.

Hinata didn't feel any pain, in what might have been a small mercy or just simply because it was too fast for his pain receptors. He simply felt the world around him become darkness. His senses shut off and there was a great nothingness awaiting him.

Then he felt light again. A warm yet constricting glow that bound him down and made him unable to move. Don't Stop Me Now was nowhere to be found and Hinata could somehow tell that this was the work of Genesis.

He could sense the others. Just as quickly as Mitarai had erased him, he did the same to them. Their souls were all slightly connected with one another, able to sense the thoughts and feelings running through them. The sadness of death, anger at Mitarai, Dio, and themselves, happiness at having each other, determination to do what they could, and so many more. The complex facets of the human heart that Mitarai wanted to erase and replace with a single setting because it was easier.

They were bound to Genesis. Mitarai's friends and teacher would be made to watch as he chased down their hope and tried to end the last resistance to him. Hinata wondered if they could do anything.

_Whether everything is doomed is down to you guys now._ Hinata mused, not caring if Mitarai could hear his thoughts or not. _Naegi, Komaru, Fukawa, everyone. I believe in you. We believe in you. Mitarai hasn't won yet._

Hinata could never hate Ryota Mitarai. Not even after all he had done to them and the world, in spite of his refusal to turn back and his actions with Genesis.

He pitied him.

(He couldn't do anything else. Not when Mitarai's heart ached at their continuing faith in Naegi- and not him- to save the world.)

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"Fukawa, so long as one person escapes from this, we can still win. Rohan-sensei chose you for a reason and Hinata agreed for the same." Naegi was trying to keep his voice steady and doing a shitty job. Kirigiri, if she hadn't been...taken, would have called out how lame his smile looked right now. "I don't know much about fate, but I know about faith. Sorry for putting this on you, but we do it because we believe in you."

"What are you doing?! Komaru, that otaku's become a God! He tore through Don't Stop Me Now like it was nothing! What is it with you Naegis and being stupid?!!" Fukawa snapped. They weren't
asking her to do this. They couldn't!

Komaru smiled like she always did, as if she wasn't going to get herself killed. "I guess we got raised to be optimistic idiots," she said reaching out to hug the Ultimate Writer. "Touko, we'll be alright. You just think about getting somewhere safe and we'll be fine. We Built This City's indestructible, isn't it?"

_Dummy! Talentless, ordinary, air-headed dummy!_ Fukawa ignored the stitch in her side and kept running through the hallways. There wasn't even enough time to wipe the tears from her hideous face. _Why'd it have to be me?! I can't run for shit! My head feels like it's going to crack in two._

Maybe Don't Stop Me Now didn't work as well when its user was dead. No one to cancel the certainty that was causing the insides of her skull to balloon and ache. No one was supposed to have what Fukawa had; even with Hinata's Stand Requiem, it was a long-shot.

If someone had two personalities like Fukawa, then it made sense that she'd be able to have two Stands, right?

There was no time for Fukawa to mentally go over all the reasons that was a terrible idea. It was the plan that everyone was risking it all for and Fukawa wouldn't be her usual useless self! She had to rush through the gates and head straight for the building ahead of her and pray it was as the same as when she left it.

The first time she ever wished to go back to the Hope's Peak Academy building. The sight of the Mutual Killing Game where it all began.

Mitarai had restored the world to its original state using Genesis. Apart from the people, naturally for a 'perfect' world, but Fukawa got the sense that they'd be next. He'd wipe out his enemies and then create a new humanity that'd worship him and Dio like Gods.

Fixing the damage of the Tragedy? That was probably just for his ego, deep down. A way to feel better about the lives lost to reach this point.

He was a child who thought it was okay to break things if you could repair them. There was no meaning to the lives and souls of the people trying to stop him if he could bring them back. Not only bring them back, he could then heal their wounds and change their memories so that they loved him.

Fukawa knew what that really made him.

A monster.

A monster that was tearing through everyone Fukawa ever cared about like they were nothing.

"Everyone's probably either dead or had their brains turned to mush. The Future Foundation, Class 77-B, those crappy kids, the Swim and Occult Idiots, Kirigiri, Kishibe, Oingo and Boingo," Fukawa's throat constricted and she had to force the words out. "Byakuya, Naegi, Komaru."

_It's just me left. Touko Fukawa against Mitarai and his Genesis._ She passed through the dining room where she and the others had confronted Dio with the truth. Back before they learnt about the Tragedy, Stands, and the extent to which Dio Brando was a heartless bastard.

That's right. She said it. No matter what Mitarai would do to her; the real Touko Fukawa would
never believe otherwise.

She had to find it. The only place in this god-forsaken building where she'd feel somewhat safe, as stupid as it'd sound out loud. Her dorm room might still look like how it was and have the one thing that'd give her the advantage. If only by superstition and the memory of a few weeks spent in hell.

The ghosts of the dormitory corridors called out to her. Maizono, Kuwata, Oowada, Fujisaki, Yamada, Ishimaru, Celestia, and even Oogami's spirits stared her down as she dashed past their doors. They weren't cheering her on like they would with Naegi. They just looked at her with a blank expression, maybe surprised that she was supposed to be their hope.

They were right. Touko Fukawa wasn't someone who gave hope. It was a dark sign that she was the one people were meant to have faith in.

As she wrenched her dorm room door open, thankfully unlocked, she slammed it behind her and sighed in relief that Mitarai didn't bring any of them back. It'd have been unbearable to have seen a scene from the Killing Game all over. But there was no time to relax! She had to think of something!

I have to hide. Hide and then ambush him! Genesis would be too quick for Fukawa to draw the pattern. She needed it to be immediate- the second he saw her, it'd have to come into play. But how?!

Fukawa stared at the solution. She put a hand to the pouch holding Syo's scissors, swallowed, and made her way towards the closet.

It took a minute to complete preparations for her plan and thirty seconds became an eternity after that. Fukawa remembered being in this position hundreds of times when one of her mothers got tired of her and threw her into the closet. Told to simply wait in the darkness until they came back for her.

Her face was drenched, hurt all over, and she was sitting inches from the door in fear that someone would open it and hurt her again. Fear of what would be done to her if she opened the door herself restrained her. Fukawa wanted to cry, if she didn't know that it'd make the pain worse. The memories of her childhood was enough to choke her and she couldn't even think of her friends. Not after what Mitarai probably did to them.

Seconds that might have been hours passed. The door openly softly and Fukawa kept herself from gasping.

It was him.

"Fukawa, I know where you are." Mitarai shut the door behind him and she could hear him walking towards the closet. "Genesis altered the ground so that it would lead me to your location. So that I could find and save you; just like I did with the others."

She shook her head in denial. He didn't. Komaru, Naegi, Byakuya, and all the others were fine. Mitarai didn't kill them and he also didn't brainwash them into his slaves. It was stupid and she refused to think further.

To accept it would be to lose all hope.

"I know it's scary, but think of the world I'll create! No wonder Dio wanted to reach Heaven so badly...I can do anything! I'll remake this world entirely. Everyone will know their fate because I'll shape it! No one will ever live a life of pain and suffering again! Fukawa, I can make it so that all
those people you killed and hurt as Syo are alive again! All the people who suffered The World's End will be returned to normal!"

Nothing would matter. Their lives would be nothing more than scripts and images that Mitarai could alter at a whim.

Mitarai sounded pleased with himself as he said, "All you have to do is come out and embrace this new world. All you have to do is look at me and you'll know love like none other. Komaru and Byakuya are waiting for you. They'll be so happy to-

Fukawa growled. It might have been the most idiotic thing she ever did. Mitarai probably already knew where she was, if the ground was leading the way. It didn't mean she didn't just give him the initiative. He was getting closer to the closet door.

She had no time to use the taser, all she had were the scissors in both hands, one for each to maximise her chance of success.

"There you are." He held the door-knob and slowly opened it.

Genesis wasn't omnipotent and it wasn't omniscient. From what little Fukawa had seen of the Stand, it had two weaknesses, and the first was that Mitarai had to know what he was changing. Even if in abstract, he had to know what he wanted to change.

Fukawa readied herself to exploit that second weakness. A tactic she'd have had no faith in until now, believing in a dumb story made up by some otaku who could draw really quick.

She was betting it all on this one moment.

The door opened and Fukawa jumped straight towards Mitarai with only two words engraved in her mind, heart, and soul.

"Heaven's Door!" She screamed, the Stand bursting from the pattern she had cut into her face. It was still pristine white, despite coming from a face soaked in blood.

Mitarai's Genesis was still weak against Heaven's Door. His face opened like a book and the scissors were mere inches from his face, but Fukawa could barely see that through the curtain of oozing red. It was almost blinding and was pushing all her triggers for the Genocider.

But that was the point.

I did all I can. Maybe you can be the one to end this, Syo! You came out because I wanted to hurt everyone who hurt me! It's time to save them instead! Fukawa knew Syo and her didn't share memories and thoughts, but this anger and determination should at least reach her!

Fukawa slipped into the recesses of her mind. A vast darkness overcame her and she felt disconnected. The only thing that differentiated this from sleep, or maybe death, was that she could feel the emotions of Syo's heart chime with her own.

Syo probably had no idea what was going on, and what they lost, but she'd know Fukawa's mourning for her friends and hatred for the man in front of her. That was why she'd keep charging forward and losing control of her momentum.
Then she looked at Mitarai and both Syo and Fukawa felt something else.

Love. A love like none other that filled Syo's heart and took Fukawa as well. She finally realised it. How beautiful the world Mitarai envisioned would be. It would be paradise and no one would be hurt. This angel wanted this for humanity and Syo was trying to hurt him?!

For what?

Komaru? Byakuya? Her friends? They meant nothing compared to Mitarai. The love that Syo and Fukawa felt for the Ultimate Hope couldn't be described in mere numbers. It was boundless and endless. Comparing it to their friends would be like comparing the size of an atom to the universe itself.

The love Genocider Syo and Touko Fukawa held for Ryota Mitarai was infinite.

An atom of the scissor in Syo's right hand made contact with an atom of a page fluttering back towards Mitarai's face.

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Ryota Mitarai was not hurt, nor was he killed, for that would be against the laws of reality.

It was not his body that was harmed but the pages that were created by Heaven's Door; for only Stands of another world could do anything to him. He could not truly comprehend the existence of other worlds beyond the abstract idea, for he had never seen them. The pages opened by Heaven's Door were seen as nothing more than a Stand affliction that was unexpected, but could be handled.

He did not know what the truth was. It was why he couldn't do anything to change it.

Thus Smells Like Teenage Spirit destroyed every last piece of the pages of Heaven's Door. At a 0 or 100% rating for another, the Stand could instantly kill someone with a single cut, slicing their skin and flesh to be almost unrecognisable.

At an infinite percentage? A number that could never be reached by any human?

The pages of Heaven's Door were not only erased, but every part that could become a page on the canvass chosen was erased with it. So fast that light could not even compare. The time taken for the mind to react could be less than a second, but might as well be an eternity compared to the speed of Smells Like Teenage Spirit now

Mitarai would never know that every single atom that made up his existence was being cut. Not even a flash and the God of the new world had perished.

The lines connecting the circles of Genesis shattered and the world around Genocider Syo became nothing but light that blinded her.

Then there seemed to be nothing.

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Genocider Syo had been walking for about three hours now.

Nothing seemed to have changed.

Hope's Peak Academy was a decaying mess that Syo had to flee because the air was poison, the land outside was scorched into a plain of ashes and ruin, and everything at a mile radius was either a skeleton or a shattered remnant of what was once a peaceful area. It was a dying land that stretched on for miles, even after Dio's death.

Under a dark sky, you might not have noticed how depressing this whole place was. Shadows could hide a lot of shit. Not under a clear morning sky; where the sun beat down and showed the contrast between a pleasant day and the reality on the ground. It was throwing off a blanket to reveal the dirt hidden underneath.

Syo didn't give a damn. She was busy calling for someone. Anyone.

"DEKOMARU! GONDOR! BIG MAC! MASTER!" Syo screamed out for the hundredth time, cupping her hands to magnify her voice. At least, that's what it was meant to do.

It wasn't like Mitarai would have killed them. He was all about that utopia shit. His Messiah Complex and jealousy to Naegi wouldn't let him be a complete monster. He probably just brainwashed them and now they were free. He had to.

*Or maybe he thought he could just bring them back. Just kill them off like it meant nothing. How could it be something with Genesis?* Syo beat down that thought as quickly as it emerged. That couldn't be true. They had to be okay and out there. Otherwise there was no point in moving.

"OINGO! BOINGO!" Syo had faith in the kid. Genesis may have made Thoth unable to predict the future, but it was gone now so he should have known where she was! "Come on! Time for that song Dekomaru loves to hear when you think we aren't listening in on you!" She called out, waiting for a reply.

The silence was a crap joke. The humour had long past and now it was being cruel. Genocider Syo was a murderer and even she found this to be too much.

She didn't want to be alone.

Looking back, killing those cute boys wasn't as fun as she thought it was. She had friends, but now she could be alone again.

*It can't just be me and Gloomy. It can't be.* Syo's scars had already dried by now- Dekomaru would be pissed if she ever saw her again- but she had the taser by her side. It was Gloomy's turn to wonder the earth for a bit. *Maybe you'll do better.*

Syo felt the volts rock her skull and she regressed back into sleep.

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Fukawa remembered feeling Syo's unease and hope before entering the real world again.
She knew where Syo was heading and was fine to take that same journey back to the overseas branch. They said you shouldn't leave your spot when losing your group, or they wouldn't be able to find you, but no one else seemed to follow that rule so why should she?

Another half-hour and there was still nothing. No signs of civilisation and definitely no signs of life.

The quiet was the worst. That lack of noise other than the wind blowing. It reminded Fukawa of how alone she was.

*Maybe he did kill them. He saw Naegi and Komaru and destroyed them without a second thought. Byakuya, Kirigiri, Asahina, Rohan, Hagakure, the Oingo Boingo Brothers. Fukawa didn't even try to stop herself from crying. It'd open up the wounds again and it wouldn't stop anything. I'm all alone.*

"KOMARU! BYAKUYA! ANYONE!" She screamed at the top of her lungs, looking up at the big open blue sky. Collapsing onto her knees, Fukawa screeched until her throat dried. "Please! I don't want to be alone! It's cold, it's dark, and my clothes are all sweaty and ruined and I look like some homeless idiot and, and-"

She screamed. In pain or sorrow, she didn't know. All she knew was that she was screaming and then she was weeping on the ground pathetically. Her body curled into a ball and she let herself lay in her own depression.

It was like anyone was going to be there for her.

"Touko!" A voice cried out, so familiar that it had to be fake. "Touko! Where are you?!"

"Fukawa, please! If you can hear us, say something!" Naegi's voice joined in the illusion too. This wasn't fair!

"We're your friends! Whatever you did, it stopped Genesis!" Asahina was there too. Damnit! Why was her mind being so cruel?

"I can assure you that Ryota Mitarai has no control over us." Kirigiri's attempt at being logical clashed with her loud voice. Of course it wasn't real; Kirigiri wouldn't scream.

"Fukawa, you will show yourself! I have been walking for miles now and will not tolerate you hiding from paranoia." Byakuya snapped. This was too cruel, even for herself. She didn't deserve this torture. "Are you even sure she's in this direction?"

"I'm 30% sure that this is 100% where she is!" Hagakure replied.

"Come on, Fukawa. For some reason, Komaru enjoys your smut novels in the dead of night. I'm sure she'll want an explanation for what happens next." Rohan shouted, managing to sound almost concerned. Her mind knew how to torment her.

"Rohan-sensei!" Komaru whined.

"She's this way! Boingo's sure of it." Oingo cried out, getting closer. Fukawa hated her mind sometimes.
"Thoth found her! I looked down and it was there! Right by the empty plains." Boingo said, sounding stupid enough that he might have been real.

She could hear them. All of them crying out to her. It was probably just a figment of her imagination. Nothing more than her self-loathing mocking her, or grief pretending that they were really there. She'd call out and try to reach them and find nothing.

It was worthless. What kind of idiot would go along with it?

"I'm over here!" Fukawa screamed. She shouted it over and over until she couldn't speak anymore and then screamed it some more.

Seconds passed and she saw them. Byakuya, Komaru, Naegi, Kirigiri, Rohan, Asahina, Oingo, Boingo, and even Hagakure. All of them saw her and were waving at her and were coming closer and she found herself standing up and running. She looked like a freak with the scars on her face and her collar being soaked in tears.

She leapt into the first two who reached her, Komaru and Byakuya, and pulled them towards her. If it wasn't for Byakuya's brief grumbling, she'd have thought this was just a dream.

Instead, Fukawa laid there and wept in their arms as the others crowded around her. This was so embarrassing! But she never wanted to let go regardless.

"W-Where's everyone else?" She asked wondering if she managed to do it.

"The Future Foundation and the Warriors of Hope are healing up. Monaca's been captured and she's got questions to answer." Naegi replied, only to bite his lip and look away. "Tengan...he's still dead. I don't know if he was brainwashed, or fell into despair on his own but-

Kirigiri turned to him, "Naegi, we should say the rest."

"Touko, did you see Class 77-B anywhere? Even their teacher?" Fukawa shook her head and Komaru couldn't find her disappointment, turning to her brother. "I guess you were right."

"So they really are gone. They wanted to atone for their sins, but I never thought it'd be in this way. They were supposed to be able to re-enter society." Naegi whispered harshly to himself.

"They made their sacrifices to save this world." Byakuya said, only sounding slightly upset about Touko rubbing her face against his shirt and maybe sniffing more than usual.

"What do we do now?" Hagakure asked, hanging back with the Oingo Boingo Brothers. He was watching over his crystal ball and Boingo his manga. "If what we heard on the radio is true..."

"The Remnants...all those ground-troops and left-overs really were cured? That the red skies are all gone?" Asahina asked. Her eyes shook and she couldn't keep herself from hoping. Total Swim-Idiot.

"I suppose he thought he was being generous with that last gift." Rohan scoffed, a cynic to the end.

Fukawa stared down to the ground, "But I cut him. I cut him infinitely. How-"

"Maybe that was Class 77-B...Don't Stop Me Now, fuelled by the will and hope of the entire class." Naegi laughed and scratched the back of his head. "Maybe I'm just being stupid."
She couldn't stop the chill down her spine. If those guys were gone, then they were down a lot of fighters. The future ahead was going to rely on all of them and the Branch Heads, but they all must have memories of Mitarai crushing them. What would they do now?

There were no more enemies to fight. Now they had to build stuff.

A soft gasp from above and Fukawa looked up to see what Naegi was staring at. She soon joined the others in their amazement at the sky.

The faces of Class 77-B. Every last one of them, even Hinata, Yukizome and Mitarai.

In the clouds above, Fukawa could see them looking down and smiling. Some were waving goodbyes, some were winking, some were laughing, and others just had a content look. It was as if they had known that Despair was gone and that they could live in peace.

They had finally repaid their sins.

It was said, and stupid, but it made Fukawa smile as well. She felt...peaceful, and a certain memory from so long ago made her turn to her best friend.

"Komaru...I think I saw a pretty nice place to have a picnic. That idea you had back at Towa City on the airship?" She softly smiled and Komaru matched it. No one even mentioned the scars on her face.

Maybe they'd heal and maybe they wouldn't. That didn't matter. Most people thought she was a stinky weirdo freak anyway so what difference did it make if she was ugly too? She was happy and she was fine with that.

The sun was beating down and the entire area looked brighter than it was before. Fukawa could see that the hill the others had ran down from had a green edge to it, just where the ridge crested, compared to the dead plains where she walked. Just ahead, if she kept on moving, was a kinder world.

Fukawa walked with her friends and didn't look back. Ahead was the future and behind was the past.

And they were done with that.

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**Stand Stats**

**Corner Of The Earth**
**User: Ryota Mitarai**
**Stats**
Destructive Power C
Speed B
Range D
Durability C
Precision B
Developmental Potential D

**Abilities**
At a range of 10m, the Stand can create 'hard' projections from the user's imagination. These projections will protect the user; treating any attempting to harm them as hostile. Attacks will have the same physical effect as if they were real. Projections have their own sense and can detect independent of the user, informing them of danger. Projections turn to nothing when outside the 10m range.

User can become intangible. Only objects created by the user can touch them; but the projections now become mere projections to all but the user. Their attacks will have no physical effect beyond blocking vision with their shape.

User has awareness of objects in a 10m, but not living souls.

**Genesis**
**User:** Ryota Mitarai

**Stats**
- Destructive Power: Infinite
- Speed B
- Range A
- Durability B
- Precision A
- Developmental Potential C

**Abilities**
This Stand is activated when Ryota Mitarai reaches Heaven. The home world becomes a canvass for the user to create and shape whatever they desire. Much like an artist on a blank canvass, or an animator, the user can change whatever they like; from creating, erasing, and altering objects, people, and even the laws of physics and reality. The only restriction for their home world is their imagination.

User must have at least an abstract idea of what they wish to change. Their reality-manipulation, beyond their personal self, is restricted to their home world and denizens of it. Those from other worlds are unaffected until entering the home world and the user can only alter themselves when entering other worlds.

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